YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY okiura
THE ASTERISK WAR
06. THE TRIUMPHAL HOMECOMING BATTLE

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"AYATO...?
WHAT ARE
YOU DOING
HERE?!
DID YOU
SNEAK
INTO MY
BED?!"

Claudia Enfield
Saya Sasamiya
Kirin Toudou
BANQUET OF THE THREE BEAUTIES

THE ASTERISK WAR

06. THE TRIUMPHAL HOMECOMING BATTLE

YUU MIYAZAKI
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YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Haydn Trowell
Cover art by okiura

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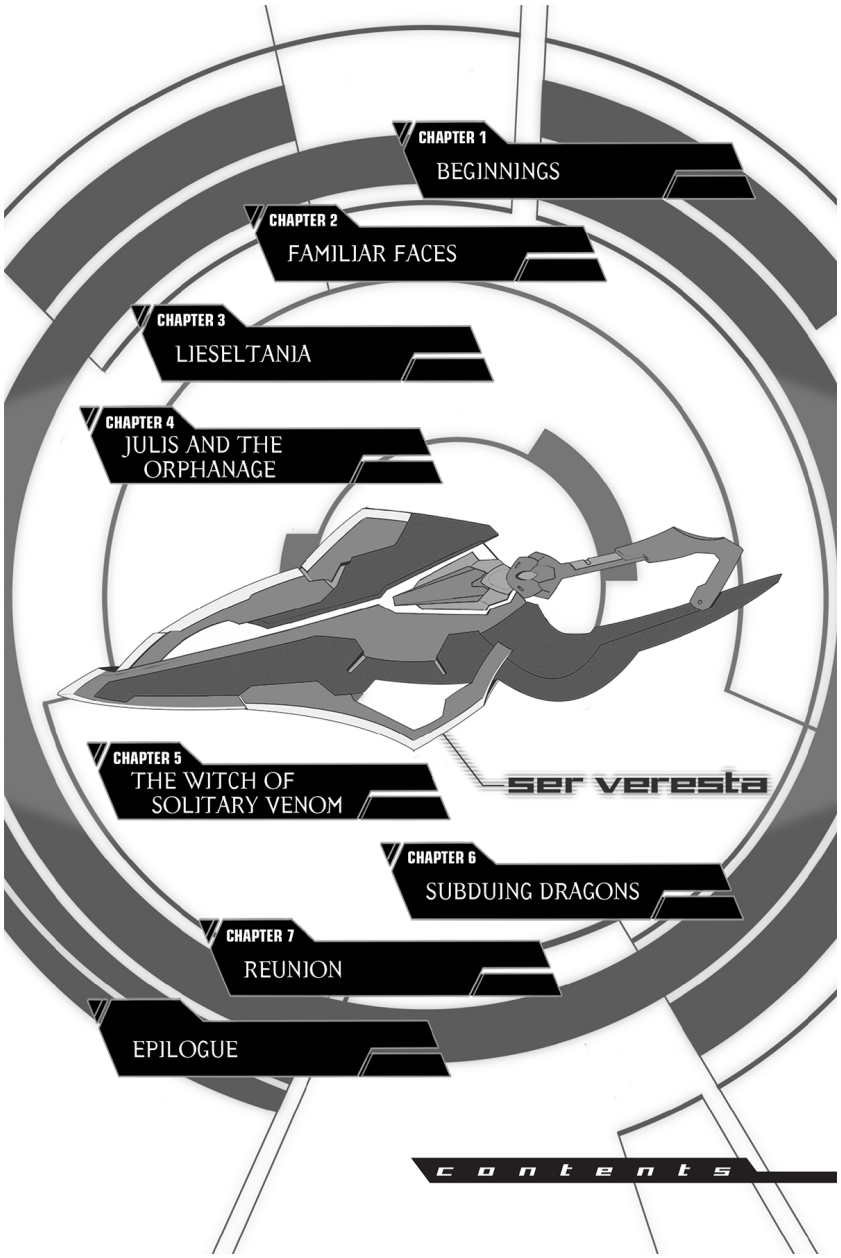
Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Chapter 1: Beginnings
Chapter 2: Familiar Faces
Chapter 3: Lieseltania
Chapter 4: Julis and the Orphanage
Chapter 5: The Witch of Solitary Venom
Chapter 6: Subduing Dragons
Chapter 7: Reunion
Epilogue

Afterword
Yen Newsletter


CHAPTER 1
BEGINNINGS
CHAPTER 2
FAMILIAR FACES
CHAPTER 3
LIESELTANIA
CHAPTER 4
JULIS AND THE ORPHANAGE
ser veresta
CHAPTER 5
THE WITCH OF SOLITARY VENOM
CHAPTER 6
SUBDUING DRAGONS
CHAPTER 7
REUNION
EPILOGUE
contents

characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

AYATO AMAGIRI

Transferred to the high school division of Seidoukan Academy on a special scholarship. Though easygoing to a fault, he possesses an enormous amount of prana, as well as extraordinary skills with a sword.

ALIAS: Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
ORGA LUX: Ser Veresta

JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD

A princess of Lieseltania and Seidoukan Academy's fifth-ranked fighter. With Ayato as her tag team partner, she has her mind set on winning the Festa.

ALIAS: the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, Glühen Rose
LUX: Aspera Spina

CLAUDIA ENFIELD

The student council president of Seidoukan Academy and the person responsible for bringing Ayato to the school. She always has a gentle smile but describes herself as "blackhearted." She's the second-ranked fighter in the school.

ALIAS: the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta
ORGA LUX: Pan-Dora

SAYA SASAMIYA

Ayato's childhood friend who lived next door to him when they were young. Perpetually sleepy and inexpressive, and a firm believer that the bigger the gun, the better. She switches between several enormous Lux firearms in a fight.

ALIAS: none yet given
LUX: type 38 Lux grenade launcher Helnekraum, type 34 wave cannon Ark Van Ders Improved Model, and others

KIRIN TOUDOU

A first-year student in Seidoukan Academy's middle school. She became the academy's top-ranked fighter at the age of thirteen. The heir to the Toudou School, which boasts over ten thousand pupils worldwide, she has tremendous natural gifts as a swordsman.

ALIAS: the Keen-Edged Tempest, Shippuu Jinrai
LUX: none (wields the katana Senbakiri)

EISHIROU YABUKI

A young man in Seidoukan Academy's newspaper club, he seems to know everything about everything. Ayato's roommate, and a member of the special ops organization Shadowstar.

LESTER MACPHAIL

Seidoukan's ninth-ranked fighter.
ALIAS: the Ax of the Roaring Distance, Kornephoros

RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato's homeroom teacher. A former champion of the Gryps tournament.

PREVIOUSLY IN *THE ASTERISK WAR*...

In the semifinals of the Phoenix Tournament, Saya and Kirin put up a good fight against Ardy and Rimcy but were unfortunately defeated. At the same time, Flora's kidnapping was revealed, with the perpetrators demanding that a freeze be put on the Ser Veresta. Ayato and Julis were at a serious disadvantage, but thanks to Saya and Kirin's efforts, Flora was safely rescued. Ayato and Julis emerged as the champions after a fierce battle and have now received an invitation to visit Lieseltania from Julis's brother, the king...

CHAPTER 1
BEGINNINGS

In a room illuminated by late-autumn moonlight, Claudia slumped deep into the sofa.

Water dripped from her long, luscious blond hair, and her body, wrapped only in a simple bathrobe, was slightly flushed. An air-window floated beside her, transmitting a seemingly perplexed voice.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m afraid that I can’t agree to that.” Claudia spoke calmly, but the person on the other side of the air-window repeated themselves in an irritated tone.

“Yes, of course, I understand the situation. Thank you for your advice.” A faint smile rose to her lips, and she casually closed the air-window.

Claudia let out a slow sigh. A long, deep sigh, as if trying to exhale all the sediment that had settled within her.

Of course, there was no way a simple sigh would be able to rid her of what filled her.

There was only one way to deal with that.

“I’ve come this far. As for what’s next…”

Claudia stood up and headed to the window. She wrapped her arms around her body, bathing in the moonlight that poured down over the thin lace of her nightgown.

“Well, well, there’s no turning back now,” she murmured, chuckling self-deprecatingly.

The wish she had held on to since that day—the sole hope she'd clung to in her recurring nightmares…

No one understood it, she thought. Even if it was discovered, and people laughed at her for being foolish or brushed it aside as worthless, undoubtedly not a single person would take her dream seriously.

After all, even Claudia herself had a hard time doing so.

And yet, it was precisely because she had held on to that foolish, worthless wish for so long that she was able to live as she did now.

Whether it was her position as student council president at Seidoukan Academy, or the fame from being ranked number two, or her goal of taking the Gryps championship, or even going to Asterisk in the first place, she had done all that groundwork to turn her wish into a reality.

It would not be an easy task. In terms of probability, she might only have one chance in a million.

But she was fine with that. After all, it wasn't zero.

"Come, let's go for a dance, Ayato. It's time for me to take the stage now."

As if relishing the words, Claudia gently closed her eyes.

*

"By the way, does anyone have any plans for winter vacation?" Julis asked, just as everyone was finishing lunch in the cafeteria.

Since the same faces had been taking the same seats almost every day lately, it was almost as if they had designated places—even though they hadn't organized anything beforehand.

At last, the commotion of getting food had died down, and the cafeteria was enveloped in a relaxed atmosphere. Maybe it was due to the fine weather, but a number of students were asleep at their tables.

"…Winter vacation?"

"It's still a while off, so I haven't really decided anything yet…"

Saya and Kirin, sitting side by side in front of Julis, tilted their heads curiously.

It was October. They had finished final exams last month, and

the short fall break at the start of the month was over. In other words, second semester had just begun.

Asterisk's six schools divided the year into first and second semesters, during which students took different units. There was an entrance ceremony in the second semester in addition to the first, so apparently, new students could be seen here and there.

"This time, at least, I want to be able to take it easy for a while…," Saya bemoaned, laying her head on the table in exhaustion.

Ayato laughed. "You had remedial classes all through fall break, didn't you?"

"Hmph…" Saya puffed out her cheeks but didn't seem to be in a mood to argue.

"Well," Eishirou jumped in, "there aren't any remedial classes during winter vacation, so you don't need to worry about that."

"Are you saying that to make yourself feel better about your own performance, Yabuki?"

"Um…?!"

At Julis's dry sniping, Eishirou, who was sitting beside Ayato, averted his eyes.

There was a big difference in Saya's grades among the subjects that she excelled at and those she didn't, but in Eishirou's case, he was always just scraping by. He didn't seem to be all that keen on studying.

Julis had the highest grades of the students sitting around the table, and while Kirin's weren't quite as high, they weren't far behind. Ayato's were slightly above average.

Each school's overall academic performance was one of the few things that influenced their results in the Festa. All exam results from the term were factored in, with particular emphasis given to the grades of Festa participants. In other words, by admitting students who only had high grades, the schools were able to increase their overall results. This was all part of the goal of cultivating students accomplished in both the literary and military arts.

That being said, the total number of points awarded based on academic performance wasn't large. Each school was ranked from first to sixth place, with points determined accordingly, but even if the regulations did place formal emphasis on academic performance, the number didn't include those given to participants

who advanced to the top four in the combat-oriented Festa.

That, more than anything, was the reason why no one batted an eye at the fact that schools' rankings in recent years had remained mostly unchanged.

Each school's position was practically fixed: The first- and second-ranked schools were Saint Gallardworth Academy and Allekant Académie, the third and fourth were Seidoukan Academy and the Jie Long Seventh Institute, and the fifth and sixth were Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies and the Le Wolfe Black Institute. For the past decade, at least, no school had moved up or down in the ranking.

Still, there were small differences in academic performance within each class, and as the number of points obtained at the third and fourth places would sometimes change, no school could afford to let its guard down when it came to education.

"Do you have any plans?" Ayato asked, trying to bring the conversation back to the topic at hand.

Julis made a complicated expression as she looked at her companions.

"Well, the truth is… After what happened with Flora, my brother wanted to invite you all to visit."

"To visit…? You mean Lieseltania?"

"Well, yes. He wants me to invite you all to come with me when I go home." Julis nodded, glancing at each of her companions in turn. "It's…it's a great honor, but…"

"Your brother? You mean the king of Lieseltania invited us?"

It was little wonder that Kirin spoke so hesitantly. To receive an invitation all of a sudden by His Majesty the King was no ordinary occurrence.

"There's no need to be so nervous. I told him not to do anything formal. He just wants to express his thanks."

"…But you don't look very happy," Saya noted. "Do you not want us to go?"

"Ah…n-no, it's not like that…" Julis faltered for a moment before catching her breath and shaking her head slightly. "My brother… Well, it's just, he isn't a bad person, but…he's a little eccentric. I'm just worried that he might be up to no good again…"

Now that she mentioned it, Julis's brother did indeed seem to be a strange one, what with the incident with Flora's maid clothes, and the questions that he entrusted to her.

“But it’s not just my brother who wants to thank you for helping Flora. The sisters at the orphanage also want to give you their appreciation in person. So it’s not that I’m reluctant to invite you all, but…” Julis gave everyone a forced smile before shrugging. “Well, you all have your own things going on, so I won’t force you.”

Ayato sank into thought.

He had been thinking about going home, at least for New Year’s, but in all honesty, his relationship with his father wasn’t the best. It wasn’t that they were on bad terms, but ever since his sister had disappeared, they often ended up arguing more than anything. His father was a taciturn man, and Ayato often found himself wondering what he really thought. His sister was the one who had mediated their relationship, so it was, in a sense, unsurprising that things had ended up this way.

Ayato had contacted his father after winning the Phoenix, but even then, he had received a cold and uninterested response. Ayato respected his father and was grateful to him for teaching him everything he knew, but he felt that it’d be best to keep some distance between them, at least for the time being.

“Well, seeing as they’ve gone to the effort to invite us, I accept,” he said, raising his hand.

Julis nodded happily. “I’m sure Flora will be pleased as well.”

At that, Kirin timidly raised her hand as well. “Um… If it’s okay, can I go, too?”

“Of course! But, Kirin… Are you sure? Don’t you want to go and see your father?”

When Kirin was still a child, her father had killed a thief to protect her, and he was now serving time in prison. It normally took all kinds of convoluted procedures to get permission to leave Asterisk, but they were greatly simplified during the holidays. She was probably only able to see the man during such times.

“I—I went to see him during the fall break, but…he got angry at me. He told me not to worry about him, that I should focus on my training.”

Despite what she said, she looked relieved.

“I went home for a little while, too,” she continued, “but there didn’t seem to be any problems. The best students are overseeing the various branch dojos, and Galaxy is supporting us as far as management is concerned. And my great-aunt, the one who recently came back to the main family, has been keeping things in order as

well."

I guess you're bound to encounter all sorts of difficulties when you operate at the Toudou School's scale, Ayato thought.

Perhaps Kirin, too, had things she wanted to think over, because she had turned down an official ranking match with the excuse that she needed more training. The grace period given to ranked students had passed, so she was now no longer ranked.

"So basically, I'm fine."

"Roger that. So what about you, Saya?"

"…I need to go home, at least for a visit." Saya frowned regretfully. "I don't want to be the only one who doesn't go… But I'll be able to get my repaired Luxes adjusted faster if I go there myself. I do want to visit Lieseltania, though…"

In the Phoenix semifinals, in the fight against Ardy and Rimcy, most of Saya's Luxes had been damaged so badly they were unusable. She had sent them back to her father as soon as she could, and it sounded like the repairs were finally complete.

"In that case, why don't you stop by Sasamiya's house first?"

"Wha—?!"

Ayato cried out as, all of a sudden, a pair of arms wrapped around his body, embracing him from behind.

Of course, there was only one person who would do such a thing:

"Every single time! Don't startle me like that, Claudia…"

"Forgive me; I couldn't help myself."

Sure enough, the person—Claudia—slowly pulled away, covering her mouth to stifle an amused laugh.

He might have let his guard down, but she had managed to take him by surprise yet again.

Claudia may have been a formidable Lux user, but the way she made her presence disappear so completely was beyond normal.

"You're always popping up out of nowhere, Claudia," Julis said, looking slightly perplexed. "Anyway, what do you mean? Stop by Sasamiya's house?"

Claudia raised her index finger with a smile. "There are no airports in Lieseltania, so you'll be going there via Germany or Austria, won't you? Sasamiya's house is in Munich, so it shouldn't be too difficult to detour."

"…You know your stuff."

"Well, she is the student council president, after all," noted

Saya, as equally surprised as Julis.

"Indeed," Claudia answered. "That being the case, it certainly wouldn't be impossible. What do you think, Saya?"

"Hmm…" The girl seemed to ponder the question before nodding. "If it's okay with you all, I don't have any objections."

"Then it's decided!" Claudia laughed with a clap, as if to signal the end of the discussion, and glanced toward Julis. "By the way, does this invitation extend to me, by any chance?"

"How long were you listening…? Oh, fine, it doesn't matter. Of course. I was going to ask you, too."

"Oh, what a relief. I would hate to be left out."

Julis stared back at Claudia in surprise.

"So…you're planning on coming, too?"

"Of course."

"It's just, you've visited Lieseltania and the palace countless times already…"

"That's true, but this time will be different, going with all of you."

They all knew Claudia had been an acquaintance of Julis's since before the pair had come to Asterisk, and judging from Claudia's friendship with Flora, too, she must have gone to Lieseltania more than just once or twice.

"It's a rare opportunity, and there's something I want to discuss with everyone—about next year."

As Claudia spoke, the air grew tense.

Now that the Phoenix was finished and exams were over, the main subject of conversation in Asterisk had already turned to the next Festa. Specifically, the team competition—known as the Gryps—that would be held next fall.

Because the most important thing was composing one's five-member team, hopeful participants were trying to sound out potential team members both from inside and outside their schools as early as possible.

Since Julis, who had won the Phoenix, had announced she was aiming for a "grand slam," her participation in the Gryps was all but certain. There was a lot of speculation surrounding what kind of team members she would recruit—her tag partner, Ayato, would of course likely be one—but there was a rumor going around that they both would join student council president Claudia's team. Moreover, it was well-known that Kirin and Saya were on good

terms with her, and they had proven their abilities in the Phoenix, so it was widely expected that Claudia would ask them to join her team, too.

Indeed, she had already asked Ayato—but it seemed she had yet to ask Julis or the others. When she had invited him, she'd indicated that she was also going to ask Julis. Whether or not Julis accepted, there was no doubt Claudia hoped to include her on her team.

"Oh, this is starting to sound interesting," Eishirou spoke up, latching onto the conversation. "Mind giving us a little more detail?"

As a member of the newspaper club, this was the kind of information he couldn't afford to overlook.

Claudia laughed softly. "By the way, Yabuki, what are you planning to do?"

"Huh?"

She dodged Eishirou's question with a smile, responding with a question of her own. "Yabuki is invited, too, isn't he, Julis?"

"Ah, of course. Lester as well."

"Heh, that's quite an honor. I didn't do all that much, though," Eishirou demurred innocently. But according to Saya and Kirin, if he hadn't been there, it was doubtful they would have been able to rescue Flora safely. Which was probably enough for him to be invited, too. "I'm sorry, but I'll have to decline. Everything's finally settling down, but the truth is, I've still got a lot of stuff to do. It might be winter vacation, but it looks like I'm not going to have much time to myself."

Eishirou had been entrusted with the post-Phoenix interviews as a thank-you for helping to rescue Flora. Ayato hadn't received much coverage, but since Julis usually shut the press out completely, Eishirou's newspaper club was taking full advantage of this opportunity to completely monopolize her. So it was fair to say that Eishirou and the newspaper club would be swamped with work for a while.

After the Phoenix, most of the interviews with Ayato and Julis that had been published all over the world had come through Eishirou. The press clubs in Asterisk had long been performing activities that went above and beyond what would be expected of students, but even so, the newspaper club's latest scoop was unprecedented.

In fact, there was little doubt that Eishirou and the press enjoyed the benefits of their Phoenix victory the most.

While Julis's might have been, Ayato's life hadn't been seriously affected by it. He had heard that he had received requests from around the world to appear in television programs and advertisements, and that all kinds of mail—everything from fan letters to threatening messages—were flooding in, but he had let the Academy deal with everything, so hardly any of it reached him. It was true that he attracted attention, but he felt that people had made a bigger fuss over him back when he'd been ranked number one. After winning the Phoenix, by contrast, the amount of students who called out to him in the corridors seemed to have fallen.

Ayato's life hadn't changed much at all, and he had ordered his usual five-hundred-yen lunch.

"Ah, but you see, the club is finally building a reputation for itself, and we've found a new sponsor, so we won't have to worry about funding for a while. All thanks to our great Phoenix champions." Eishirou put his hands together toward them, as if in supplication. "But speaking as an outsider, you guys are both very adaptable, and it's certainly true that you get along well—"

At this, Julis's eyes snapped wide open. "If you start asking strange questions again, I won't do any more interviews."

"R-right. I understand."

"…Strange questions?" Saya glanced at Eishirou, who had broken out in a cold sweat.

"Ah, well, you see, about that… I was considering looking more deeply into the princess's relationship with Amagiri, but…" Judging by the way he was glancing around nervously, he probably wasn't being entirely honest.

"Oh, in that case, ask away."

"Huh? Oh, no, Sasamiya has already confirmed everything that needs to be said, I think. I don't have any questions right now."

"…Hmm…"

Unlike Ayato and Julis, when the press covered Saya and Kirin —and in Saya's case, it went without saying that such coverage also served to advertise her father's Luxes—Saya would answer honestly no matter what, so it was widely known that she and Ayato were childhood friends.

"The thing about information is that the fewer people who know it, the more valuable it is. But if you still have some juicy

material on Amagiri, well, that would be a different matter…"

"Juicy material…? Oh, well, when we were kids, we took a bath together, and—"

Panicked, Ayato put a hand over her mouth.

"A bath…," Julis murmured.

"Bathing together…," Kirin muttered at the same time. Her and Julis's eyes took on a dangerous sheen.

At that moment, a sudden commotion erupted in the cafeteria.

"Huh…? What's going on?"

When this many people gathered in one place, some were always bound to be looking around, but an unexpected arrival drew the students' gazes toward the entrance en masse.

"Wha—?!" Eishirou, who had reacted the fastest, stood up, his eyes wide in surprise.

Ayato looked around to see what was happening, when he noticed two young women heading straight for them.

"Ah, I completely forgot. Ayato, I meant to tell you that you have a visitor." Claudia laughed.

Ayato knew one of the two women well.

It was Kyouko Yatsuzaki, their homeroom teacher. She normally came across as somewhat bloodthirsty, but for some reason, she looked a little nervous now. The nail bat that she normally carried was nowhere to be seen.

The woman standing next to her looked about the same age, or maybe a little younger. She had a beautiful, dignified countenance, her tight, well-toned body clothed in a city guard uniform.

Ayato thought he recognized her from somewhere, but he couldn't put a name to her face.

When he heard it uttered amid the clamor of the hall, he too found himself rising from his chair.

"It's Helga Lindwall, commander of the city guard!"

It was little wonder he couldn't remember her right away.

There wasn't a person in Asterisk who didn't know about Helga Lindwall, but only a few would be able to recognize her, as she rarely appeared in public. In the pictures that Ayato had seen, she was a bewitching young woman with a teenager's figure, presumably no older than the students themselves—but at times, she also seemed to have the tender figure of a young girl.

Her nickname during her school years was the Witch of Time Manipulation, Chronotemis.

She had the ability to control time around her, and was renowned as the most powerful Strega in the history of Asterisk.

She was said to often change her own age depending on the task at hand, but it had also been more than half a century since she had won the Lindvolus, so she could easily have been three times Kyouko's age.

"…Ah, Amagiri. The commander of the city guard wants to see you. Can we borrow you for a little while?" Kyouko's voice betrayed a hint of discomfort.

Helga raised her right hand a little. "Nice to meet you, Amagiri. I'm Helga Lindwall."

"N-nice to meet you." Ayato, flustered, took her hand, and was at once overwhelmed by her prana, honed to a level he had never seen before.

"There's something I want to talk about with you. Yatsuzaki, is there somewhere we can speak in private?"

"Ah, of course. Enfield, lend them a guidance room."

"Very well. Let's see…" No sooner had Claudia picked up her mobile to check availability than she continued, "Rooms seven and eight are in use right now, but you can take any of the others."

"Thanks for your help, Yatsuzaki. I can handle it from here. I have to admit, I was surprised to hear you had become a teacher, but it's good to see you doing so well." Helga smiled faintly as she spoke, plunking a hand down on Kyouko's head.

"Ha-ha, thank you…"

"Shall we go, Amagiri?"

"Huh? Uh, w-wait…!"

Helga was already walking briskly away.

Ayato glanced toward Kyouko balefully, but her eyes only told him to get going.

*

"Phew…"

As she watched Ayato rush out of the cafeteria after Helga, Kyouko let out a labored sigh and sat down on a nearby chair.

"It looks like the Witch of Nails is no match for the commander of the city guard," Claudia laughed.

"…Shut up." Kyouko glared back at her.

"But what kind of business could Helga Lindwall have with

Ayato…?" Claudia continued.

"No idea. I just had the bad luck to get caught by her. Go and ask Enfield."

Julis turned toward Claudia, but she only shook her head.

"She seemed to want to report something to Ayato in person, but I'm afraid I don't know the specifics."

"Report…?"

If the commander of the city guard was working on something related to Ayato, the first thing that came to mind was Flora's kidnapping. They had heard from Madiath Mesa, the chairman of the Festa Executive Committee, that Helga had a strong interest in the incident.

But in that case, she should have wanted to speak to Julis, too.

So if she wasn't…

"…Ms. Yatsuzaki, how do you know the commander?" Saya asked Kyouko.

"Huh?" Kyouko exclaimed in a grouchy voice. She scratched her head for a moment before answering brusquely, "We go back a while. I owe her for some stuff."

"Ah, I've heard all kinds of stories about little Kyouko's school days. You were really the wild one, huh? I'd guess some stuff happened between you and the city guard?"

"Who are you calling 'little Kyouko'? I'll kill you, Yabuki."

Kyouko's dark gaze turned darker still, and breaking out into a sweat, Eishirou waved his hands. "I-it was a joke. I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"…Ms. Yatsuzaki, even you can't hold your own against Helga Lindwall, can you?"

Back when Kyouko was a student of Le Wolfe, she had led the team that had won the Gryps. Le Wolfe was the weakest school when it came to the team competition, and Kyouko's remained the school's only victory.

"Are you crazy? She'd kill me on the spot," Kyouko answered without hesitation, waving her hand as if to say there would be no contest.

"But, little Kyou—Ms. Yatsuzaki, don't you specialize in countering? Surely, you could…"

"Ha, you all don't understand, do you?" Kyouko rested her chin in her hands, looking at Eishirou in wonderment. "Well, she hasn't really stood out lately, so I guess you wouldn't. That woman's

strength lies in her overwhelming close-combat ability, honed through years of training. I'm no match for that."

"…Commander Lindwall is certainly strong, but Ms. Yatsuzaki, there's a lot we could learn from such a great teacher as yourself," Claudia said. "And besides, you're only talking from your own experience, aren't you?"

Kyouko's face twisted into a grin. "What, so you want me to train you again?"

"By all means." Claudia, by contrast, wore a gentle smile.

"Ah-ha, right, there was a rumor that the president's team had been getting some secret training from you."

"It's no secret. I am a teacher, you know, here at Asterisk, so if you want me to give you a good lesson, just let me know. If you think you're up for it." Kyouko fixed Eishirou with a menacing grin.

Broadly speaking, there were two types of teachers at Asterisk: those who, like Kyouko, could provide guidance in combat skills in addition to their academic classes, and those who were purely responsible for classes.

Of course, there was no doubt that the former was more valuable, but the fact remained that there weren't enough in any of the schools.

"Well, I'm afraid that in the last Gryps, my team was defeated right away."

"Th-that wasn't your fault! You were up against the Silverwinged Knights, after all!"

As Kirin had said, in the last Gryps, Claudia's team had been set against Gallardworth's, and promptly defeated. Julis had watched that game, and to be perfectly honest, there had been a considerable difference in ability. Claudia was the only one who was really able to put up a fight, but the opposing team wasn't so weak that she could defeat them alone. Even if they had a hundred rematches, Gallardworth would probably win every time.

In fact, Claudia's team members had all already graduated.

"Well, whatever. Come find me when you've got your team ready. I'll take care of you." Kyouko cracked her neck and left.

"—By the way, Julis," Claudia said after watching Kyouko go.

"Wh-what?"

"I heard that your Aspera Spina wasn't able to be repaired."

"Oh, well, I guess there was no way around it."

Julis's Lux had been severely damaged during the ferocious

championship match at the Phoenix. She had asked the Matériel Department to repair it but had received a message the other day saying nothing could be done. While she had already half given up on its restoration, it was, after all, painful to let go of one's longtime partner.

It took time to calibrate a Lux—especially the type used by Stregas and Dantes—so you had to apply for a new one as soon as possible. Julis was currently in the middle of that process.

"In that case, maybe it would help if you served as monitor for the new Lux models? What do you think?"

"New Lux models?"

"You mean the ones developed with Allekant?" Saya blurted out.

"Indeed. We've finally completed the prototype, so it's undergoing final examinations, but…well, it's somewhat difficult to handle, so we've been having a little trouble finding a suitable monitor."

"I don't mind. But why me?"

"The user needs to be able to process spatial information without any delay, and as far as I know, you excel the most at that, here at Seidoukan."

"Hmm…" Since Julis herself also took pride in that fact, all she could do was nod.

"You won't be the only monitor, though, so don't let it get to your head. What do you think?"

Essentially, the most important thing was to become familiar with using the weapon. If it were a slender-pointed sword, she might be able to handle it like the Aspera Spina, even if it took some time to calibrate it.

But then, would that mean I wouldn't get any stronger…?

It was thanks to Ayato's strength that they had won the Phoenix. Of course, there were matches they would have surely lost if not for her, but the difference between the two of them was unmistakable.

Julis pondered it for a moment before giving her answer:

"Okay. I'll do it."

*

While Ayato had gotten used to being in the limelight since he'd

won the Phoenix, he had never before been the subject of so much curiosity at school.

Helga, however, paid no heed to the buzzing mass of students who stood watching them from a distance as she spoke.

"—I saw you during the Phoenix. Very promising. The final match in particular was really something. If you learn to master your prana, you'll grow even further."

"Huh? Th-thank you." Surprised at suddenly being addressed, Ayato was at a loss for a response.

"Things have been relatively peaceful in Asterisk over the past few years, but Stjarnagarm is always looking to recruit new members. It would be a great help if a young man with your level of strength were to join us."

"Um, well, that's…"

While he considered how to respond, Helga raised an eyebrow a little. "…Ah, forgive me. I'm not much of a conversationalist. You looked nervous, so I was trying to get you to relax…"

"Oh."

That wouldn't be easy, what with the way she was talking. However, it seemed her own confidence was unassailable.

"…Well, here we are."

They had reached the high school guidance rooms. Helga released the lock with a practiced hand.

The guidance rooms were minimalistic, fitted only with a desk and some chairs. When Ayato, at Helga's urging, took the seat across from her, she got straight to business.

"I suspect you've already guessed this, but I'm here to talk about your sister—Haruka Amagiri."

"…Yes." He had expected as much, so he calmly nodded.

"To start with, let me explain why Seidoukan Academy is assisting Stjarnagarm in the search for your sister. We've received testimony that Haruka Amagiri once participated in an illegal event, the Eclipse—and of course, we're the ones who are involved in investigating that. Have you ever heard of it?"

"Only a little. Just that it's a dangerous tournament, and that participants can lose their lives."

"That's right. And to participate in the Eclipse, you have to be a student at Asterisk, just like in the regular Festa."

"A student…?" When he pondered just what that meant, he instantly remembered something Claudia had said not long ago.

—His sister's data had been erased, and not a single person could remember her.

"So what you're saying is that even though my sister was on the books, she didn't actually attend the school…?"

"We're considering that possibility. But it would be quite unusual, even for someone taking part in the Eclipse. The vast majority of its participants are regular students."

Did that mean his sister was an exception?

"Um… Claudia asked this as well, but is it even possible for such a student to get their hands on an Orga Lux, or to have their data erased?"

Helga's eyebrow twitched. "We still don't know who's behind the Eclipse, but we have an idea what their goal might be."

"Their goal…?"

"Just so you know, this is classified information, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't disclose it to anyone. But I guess it doesn't matter; it already seems to be common knowledge in some circles. Still…have you ever heard the name Danilo Bertoni?"

"Danilo…? No." Ayato shook his head.

"He was the previous chairman of the Festa Executive Committee."

"—!"

"Well, I guess I shouldn't be too surprised that you haven't heard of him. Unlike the current chairman, Madiath Mesa, he hardly ever appeared in public. But even if you don't recognize the name, you've at least heard how he died, I take it?"

"It was…an accident, right?"

Even Ayato, who had little interest in the Festa, remembered the incident; it had been plastered all over the news. A submersible had been discovered in Asterisk's harbor block, with the body of the Festa Executive Committee chairman inside.

"Right. Back then, Danilo had tremendous influence. It would have no doubt been easy for him to manipulate students' data. It isn't public knowledge, but I could list any number of other times when he's gone to extremes purely out of self-interest. The Eclipse is just one example." Helga paused to catch her breath. "But he died in that accident, and he left only indirect evidence, nothing conclusive. And the integrated enterprise foundations probably disposed of it or covered it up. There was pressure on the investigation, too, and it ended up getting suspended. That said, it's

impossible to sweep everything under the rug, and Danilo's bad reputation seems to have leaked out here and there."

Ayato pondered all this in silence.

"…"

"What are you thinking?" Helga asked.

"…Mr. Bertoni was an executive at an integrated enterprise foundation, right?"

"Right. The Executive Committee is composed of the management of each of the IEFs. Danilo was a member of Solnage."

"In that case, wouldn't he have undergone a mental adjustment program?"

Based on what he had heard from Claudia, the executives of the IEFs were supposed to undergo these types of programs to eliminate their sense of self-interest. As such, Danilo shouldn't have been able to act with self-interest at all.

"Huh. You're well-informed. That isn't public knowledge either, you know." Helga nodded in admiration. "You're correct. All executives have to undergo a mental adjustment program in order to prevent slipups based on human mistakes, and so that they'll make decisions based on the shared ideals of their respective foundations. Danilo did, too… But in reality, the level of adjustment depends on one's post and position. Those at the top pretty much end up losing what makes them human, but the adjustment tends to be fairly lenient for posts that require some level of creative decision-making. The Festa is certainly one of those."

"I see…"

"The current Executive Committee chairman, Madiath Mesa, is a member of Galaxy in name only. His wish after winning the Festa was to become an Executive Committee member. It's possible that people like him have never undergone an adjustment."

Ayato had heard of cases like that. "So what you're saying is that Danilo Bertoni was so self-involved, the adjustment program had no effect?"

"That's one possibility, but… Well, I've said this much, so I guess it won't hurt. We've also been considering another possibility to explain his actions: that someone with the ability to manipulate other people's thoughts might be involved."

"That's…"

Only an extremely small number of Dantes and Stregas had the ability to interfere with other people's minds, a number similar to

those gifted with healing abilities.

Moreover, such individuals were the most strictly managed. Which was without doubt an entirely reasonable precaution, given the dangers they could pose to others.

“But that’s just a possibility. I’ve encountered several people with that kind of ability, and they’re not as all-powerful as most think. They have to be constantly manipulating their target, so if they were to be seen by another Genestella, the flow of mana would be unmistakable. On top of that, they’re also not very effective against other Genestella.”

It was said that, since the flow of mana was controlled by one’s prana, abilities that acted directly upon a target (including the ability to manipulate people’s thoughts) tended to have a weaker effect on one’s fellow Genestella.

“There’s no way that the Executive Committee wouldn’t take precautions, and if Danilo was being manipulated like that, someone ought to have noticed it right away,” continued Helga, before relaxing her expression. “Anyway, we’ve started to take another look into Danilo and the events surrounding him. If we find any information relating to the Eclipse, we might also come across a clue on your sister’s whereabouts. I can’t tell you to hold out for good news, but I thought you deserved to know where things stand.”

“Thank you,” Ayato said, bowing his head.

But there was still something he didn’t understand.

“Um… Did you come all this way just to tell me that?”

Helga replied with a faint smile. “I’ll say this: I’m grateful to you. It’s thanks to you that we’re able to restart our investigation into Danilo. The bigwigs at the IEFs might not like what we’re doing, but knowing that at least some approve means that, even if we come across something, they don’t think past events will hurt them too much.”

“…Your expression… You won’t let things go at that, will you?”

At this, Helga looked at Ayato with some surprise.

“Hmm… I see. You’re an interesting one, Ayato Amagiri. I can see why she took an interest in you.”

“What?” Ayato had no idea what she meant.

Helga scratched at an eyebrow. “Don’t worry about it… But it would be irresponsible to say any more… Tell me, have you ever heard of the Ban’yuu Tenra?”

“You mean Jie Long’s student council president?”

“It seems she’s taken an interest in you. You’ll probably run across her in the future…but don’t try to go up against her. She’s fundamentally different from you or me.”

“Different…?”

He was not following her at all.

“Just a bit of advice, a token of my good will; you don’t need to understand right now. Just remember not to get involved with the Ban’yuu Tenra, or the Witch of Solitary Venom, Erenshkigal—for your own good. They’re both different, but they exist on a whole other plane.” She spoke in a serious tone.

“Oh, and I have one other thing to tell you,” she continued, changing the subject. She took out a mobile device and opened an air-window.

An image of a thin man with stonelike eyes was projected.

“Grimalkin Gold Eye Number Seven. His name is Werner. We’re pretty sure he’s the one who kidnapped Flora Klemm.”

“What?! So you’re saying there’s proof that Le Wolfe had something to do with it?”

Helga held out a hand to stop Ayato from getting to his feet. “No, not yet… Or should I say, we probably won’t find any evidence. Dirk Eberwein is too smart for that. Things might be different if we could get into the Academy, but we won’t be able to reach him with what we have now.” She spoke calmly, but there was a hint of frustration in her voice. “Dirk Eberwein’s strategy isn’t particularly cunning. No, the most irritating thing about that man is his attitude. He doesn’t aim to win, just to make sure that his opponent loses. He profits off deceiving others. Which is why it’s hard to get to the bottom of it all.”

“In that case…”

“What we found was evidence that this man, Werner, was attacked by someone else. The same bloodstains were found both in the underground block that he probably used to escape, and at the site of the kidnapping.”

“Someone else…?”

“Yes. Probably someone from a rival intelligence organization. But we don’t know which. We doubt it was someone at Seidoukan. Werner would be undeniable proof of Le Wolfe’s involvement, so they wouldn’t want to get rid of him, and if they were to try to detain him somewhere, it would be public knowledge by now.”

“What if Le Wolfe silenced him after he failed?”

Helga shook her head. “Impossible. The Cats are an important asset to their foundation. Even if he were caught, there would be no need to eliminate someone so skilled. In fact, Dirk Eberwein is being held responsible by the IEF for losing him, so it looks like he’ll have to lie low for a while. Which is to say that it was probably someone from outside Seidoukan and Le Wolfe, maybe one of the other schools, or another organization.”

“…I see.”

It looked like Flora’s kidnapping was a complicated affair. It wouldn’t be solved in a day.

“We’re still investigating. Let Riessfeld know for me, would you?” Helga asked, standing up.

Ayato looked her over once more, noticing that her every action seemed completely natural but didn’t leave so much as a single opening.

“You have the eyes of an Asterisk student,” Helga commented, as if reminiscing. “Good, earnest eyes, and a strong will. But people with eyes like yours are easily deceived. You had best be careful.”

“Okay…”

“I’ll let you know if there are any developments.”

And with nothing more, Helga left, leaving him alone in the guidance room.

“Easily deceived, huh…?” Ayato muttered with a strained smile, scratching at his cheek uneasily.

CHAPTER 2
FAMILIAR FACES

Ayato and company waited to board their flight in a VIP lounge at the North Kanto Mass-Impact Crater Lake floating airport.

"I was a little worried when they wouldn't tell me what was going on, but to send the royal family's exclusive plane…?" Julis grumbled to herself, hands on hips. "This can't be my brother's idea."

The plane they were scheduled to board was visible through the window directly ahead. Its fuselage was decorated with Lieseltania's elaborate national coat of arms. According to Julis, the red rose on a golden shield represented House Riessfeld; the eagle with a crown in its talons represented the former royal house, House Barzelnia; and it also incorporated motifs from several other crests to represent various other royal houses.

"There's no airport, but you have an exclusive plane for the royal family?"

Julis answered Ayato's question with a sigh. "The royal family's main role is foreign trips. We would be in trouble if we didn't do that much. We rely on our neighboring countries for management and maintenance…but it's a complicated situation. I'll explain it to you later."

"Lieseltania's situation is indeed a little complicated," Claudia agreed with a soft chuckle. "Well, shall we get ready?" She put her hands together and looked over her companions.

Since Lester had decided not to come, it was just Julis, Ayato, Claudia, Kirin, and Saya.

With New Year's Eve just around the corner, the airport was

unusually crowded, but the students had the VIP lounge to themselves. That too seemed to have been arranged by Julis's brother, and they even had an exclusive boarding bridge leading to the plane so they could leave the city without drawing any undue attention.

Since they were leaving Asterisk, they sported casual clothes, without the school crests they were normally required to carry. Julis was wearing a chic dress; Claudia a knitted turtleneck, miniskirt, and tights; Saya wore a parka over denim shorts and leggings; while Kirin had on a large sweater and slacks.

Ayato's look was, by contrast, rather plain, consisting of a collared shirt, jeans, and a jacket.

"Oh yes. Everyone, please check that you've all completed the proper procedures for taking your Luxes with you."

At Claudia's suggestion, they each checked the applications on their mobile devices. It seemed they had all received approval, so they were good to go.

Within Asterisk, permission was required to carry Luxes beyond a certain level of power. The situation was the same when taking them outside Academic City. The rules were particularly strict about Orga Luxes, and while Ayato had received permission, his application for the Ser Veresta had taken the longest.

It should have been the same for Claudia's Pan-Dora, but it seemed she had been given a free pass by the IEFs.

"Speaking of which, Julis, you didn't have to apply for anything, did you?"

"Ah, the technology behind the new Lux I'm testing hasn't been made public yet, so they won't let me take it with me." Julis gave Kirin a forced smile. "But it sounds like you're the one who had some difficulty?"

"Oh yeah… But it all worked out." It seemed that the procedures for Kirin's Senbakiri had been different again, and had taken longer than expected.

"Well, Lieseltania isn't Asterisk, so I don't think we'll need to use our weapons… Ah?"

As he spoke, Ayato's mobile began to ring. Just as he was wondering who it could be—

"Wha…?"

His hand froze in place when he saw the name.

"? What is it, Ayato?"

“N-no, it’s nothing—”

But when he turned around to try to hide the name from Saya, his finger brushed against the answer button.

“*Yoo-hoo, Ayato! Are you free?*” No sooner had the air-window snapped open than Sylvia’s cheerful, grinning face appeared.

“—?!”

As soon as her voice rang out, a wave of astonishment and tension rolled over his companions.

“*Geez, Ayato, you asked me for my number, and you haven’t even called once! What gives?*” But it didn’t take long for Sylvia, on the other side of the air-window, to notice the situation. She lowered her eyebrows and spoke dangerously, “*Oh my… Are you in the middle of something?*”

“Ah, n-no, it isn’t like that…” Ayato tried to dodge the question, entirely unsure how to answer.

There was nothing unusual about receiving a phone call from an acquaintance. Of course, the world-famous songstress Sylvia Lyyneheym was no ordinary acquaintance, but his companions already knew that Ayato had met her.

However, since he’d promised Sylvia not to reveal the truth to anyone, he hadn’t been entirely open with them about the circumstances of their meeting, and he’d given each girl a different explanation.

Thanks to that, Julis and Saya had continued hounding him on the topic for quite some time, but things were finally starting to cool down.

And now, with this timing…

“Oh my, if it isn’t Sigrdrífa. I don’t think we’ve seen each other since the closing ceremony of the Phoenix.” Claudia stepped into view of the air-window, a broad smile on her face.

"*Yep, that's right. We didn't get much chance to talk, though, did we? It feels like it's been longer… You look well, Parca Morta.*"

"We would be able to talk more if you would make a better attempt to show your face at the Rikka Garden Summit once in a while."

"*Ha-ha… That stings.*"

Claudia and Sylvia had known each other for a while, so the exchange was surprisingly relaxed.

Until Julis broke in. "By the way—just what kind of business does the student council president of Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies have with Ayato?"

"*Don't make such a face, Riessfeld.*" Sylvia parried Julis's sharp gaze with a laugh, before turning her attention back to the boy in question. "*The student council president doesn't have any business with Ayato. No, I'm calling as an individual.*"

"As an individual…?"

"*That's right. Are you going to make me repeat myself, Ayato?*" Sylvia pouted. "*Why didn't you call me? I didn't help you out just for your thanks, but for you to ignore me completely, that hurts, you know.*"

Despite her words, her tone was full of mirth, and she didn't seem to be blaming him.

"Um, you see… Sorry. You seemed very busy, and I didn't want to bother you. You're in the middle of a tour right now, aren't you?" He felt a little relieved to be able to explain.

He had wanted to thank her, but he'd been so busy after the Phoenix that once everything had settled down, Sylvia had already left on her Asia tour. She should have still been in the middle of it, so her call had taken him by surprise.

They'd exchanged contact info, but after all, they had met in person only once. Moreover, she was a famous idol, widely considered the songstress of the century. He was well aware that she had a friendly personality, but he still found it hard to believe he could talk to her practically whenever he wanted.

"*Hmm, so you were paying attention after all. All right, I'll let you off the hook, then.*" Sylvia nodded with a smile.

"I'll call you when things quiet down a bit on your end, I promise. I really do want to thank you. You must be in…um, Thailand?"

"*Yep, Bangkok. I was going to go back to Asterisk next month, but it looks like I might be delayed a little while. Anyway, if you want to thank me… Uh, Ayato, I have a small request, if you'll hear me out?*"

"A request? Well, if I can help…"

At this, Sylvia gave him a mischievous wink.

"*Don't worry—it isn't anything too hard. There's a school fair next year, right?*"

"Ah, right, in the spring. I haven't gone before, so I don't really know what it's about or anything, though."

After all, this year's school fair had already finished by the time that he had transferred to Seidoukan.

While school fairs were no doubt major events at regular schools, it went without saying that in Asterisk the Festa came first. School fairs were typically held in the spring, when there were no Festa events. And he'd heard that the excitement surrounding the fair was comparable to the Festa's.

"*Yep, so will you go on a date with me?*"

"A date, huh? Well, if that's all… Wait, a *date*?!"

Since she had asked it so offhandedly, Ayato found himself nodding automatically, until he finally realized what she had said.

"*Ah, what a relief. I'll be sure to wear a disguise, like last time.*" Her response brushed aside his question.

"That isn't what I meant!"

Sylvia chuckled so hard at the flustered Ayato that her shoulders shook with glee, when Julis and Saya, eyes wide in shock, broke in:

"H-hold on a second! Just what are you saying?!"

"…I can't let that go."

Claudia, arms crossed and wearing a wry smile, took a step back, while Kirin stared at him with a troubled look.

"*What I'm saying is that I want to get to know Ayato better. Of course, I'd feel bad if I was taking him away from his girlfriend. But you don't have a girlfriend, do you?*"

"N-not really…"

"*Good. Then there's no problem. We'll work out the details later.*" Sylvia gave him a short wave, and the air-window snapped shut.

"W-wait, Sylvia!" Ayato's voice rang out in vain. He could feel the accusing eyes of his companions boring into him from behind.

"…Anyway, it's boarding time. Let's go… What? It's not like we're short on time. We'll have him tell us everything once we're on

board.”

Listening to Julis’s thorny voice, Ayato felt a cold sweat run down his back.

*

“—I’m sorry, but I can’t break my promise.”

When Ayato firmly stated this, Julis let out a deep sigh.

“Good grief… Well, it is you we’re talking about. I had a feeling you would say something like that.”

Saya flashed him a bitter smile, throwing in the towel as well. “…You really are stubborn, Ayato.”

“Now, now, that’s one of his best qualities, after all,” Claudia said, clapping her hands as if to declare the topic finished.

Ayato heaved a sigh of relief and leaned back into the soft sofa cushion.

Perhaps he should have expected as much, given that it was a royal plane, but the cabin was extravagantly decorated and surprisingly comfortable. Of course, they had to return to their regular seats for takeoff and landing, but now that the plane was in the air, they were all able to relax around a spacious table.

Well, strictly speaking, all but one.

“…How are you feeling?” Ayato asked Kirin, who was slumped over in the seat next to him.

“I-I’m all right, thank you for asking…,” Kirin replied with a smile seemingly devoid of strength.

She didn’t seem well at all. Her face had turned frighteningly pale, and if you looked closely, you could see her feet trembling.

“I’m sorry to make you all worry… I-I’ve never been a good flier, ever since I was little…”

“Wouldn’t it be better to go back to your seat and try to rest there for a while?” Julis offered.

Since the regular seats were recliners, it would certainly be a better place to lie down.

Yet, Kirin shook her head. “I—I think I’d rather stay here with everyone…”

She had looked ill during the entire flight. No doubt this was why.

And then:

“Yeek?!”

Out of nowhere, the plane jolted violently, and Kirin collapsed onto Ayato, her face slamming into his thigh. She quickly glanced up, holding her nose with a frown.

"Ow…"

"A-are you okay?"

"Y-yes, I think so… Wha—?!"

Taking in the situation, she immediately tried to lift her body in a panic, but fell onto Ayato's lap again, unable to muster her strength.

The scene was not unlike lying on a lap pillow.

"U-um, s-sorry…! I—I didn't mean to…" Her gaze swung left and right in alarm, when Ayato, with a gentle smile, rested a hand on her head.

"Don't worry about it, Kirin. Stay where you are until you calm down."

"Wha—?! B-but…!"

"It's fine."

As Ayato stroked her soft, silvery hair, Kirin's weak nod was full of apology—and also a hint of happiness.

"Grrr…"

"Mrrrm…"

Saya and Julis were watching them with eyes that seemed to want to scream. He could almost see the steam rising from their faces.

Once again, Claudia came to the rescue, deftly changing the subject: "Well then, now that we're all here, there's something I would like to discuss with everyone." Her voice was calm, but it had a stern ring.

No one failed to notice it. They all turned toward her.

"You've probably already guessed…but I want to talk about next year's Festa. I would like to ask you all to participate as my team members in the Gryps." Claudia paused there and turned to Ayato. "I've already invited Ayato, but his answer was—"

"—only if Julis joins," he answered before she could finish.

"And do you still feel the same way?"

"Yes," he declared.

A blush began to color Julis's cheeks. "W-well, that is the sort of thing you would say." She nodded.

"In that case," Claudia said, turning toward Julis, "what do you say?"

“I’d like to ask you something first.”

“By all means.”

“Why are you so fixated on the Gryps? With your abilities, you shouldn’t have any problem winning the Phoenix or the Lindvolus, but since fighting in the last Gryps, you haven’t shown any interest in participating in either.”

Ayato had wondered the same thing. There was a rumor that she had agreed to a contract with one of the IEFs, but Claudia herself didn’t seem to have an urge to participate in any other tournaments.

“You’re right. I should be able to scrape through the Phoenix or the Lindvolus. But it would be a difficult victory, and that would be no good.”

“And the Gryps is different?”

“Indeed, so long as I have reliable team members,” Claudia confirmed with a smile. “I’ll tell you more if you agree to join. It relates to my weakness, you see, and my partner.”

She gave the holder at her waist a pat. The Orga Lux Pan-Dora clearly lay inside.

“…Precognition has a weakness?” Saya frowned suspiciously.

The Pan-Dora was an Orga Lux of such overwhelming power that there was hardly anyone who hadn’t heard its name, and yet no one, it seemed, knew any specifics about its abilities.

It was said to be able to look into the future, but specifically how far ahead could it see? How many times could it be used? Even the usually well-informed Eishirou could only grasp at straws.

Ayato had heard from Claudia about the toll it took on its user, but even he knew nothing about its true power.

Claudia laughed softly. “There’s no such thing as an invincible weapon.”

“But you’re pretty strong even without the Pan-Dora,” Kirin said timidly, tilting her head. Her complexion seemed to have improved a little, and some strength had returned to her voice.

“No, without the Pan-Dora, my abilities don’t amount to much. That’s why I need strong team members. After all, to win the Gryps we would have to defeat the Life Rhodes.”

The Life Rhodes was the name given to Saint Gallardworth Academy’s strongest teams, composed of its Page One–ranked students. The ten highest-ranked students were divided into two teams that specialized in fighting as a unit, the first of which had

won the last Gryps.

Of course, the members of those teams would be different this time, but Pendragon and Gloriara, who had led them, would remain. And they would certainly be the favorites to win this time, too.

“Zhao Hufeng and Cecily Wong from Jie Long, the tag team that won the last Phoenix, will probably be participating as well. Moreover, the Ban’yuu Tenra’s best disciple will probably be part of Jie Long’s team.”

“Ah, their number two, Hagun Seikun. I’ve heard about his skills.”

“Queenvale’s Rusalka can’t be underestimated either… So even if we just consider what we already know, there will be strong competition, and there are probably others who haven’t announced their participation yet. And this is just between us, but it looks like the Executive Committee is considering bringing back the mercenary system, so an attack could come from anywhere.”

“The mercenary system…?” Ayato repeated.

“It lets people from outside Asterisk participate in the Festa,” Julis answered sullenly. “There are restrictions, of course, but it’s used to keep the size of the competition consistent. Fewer students tend to participate in the Gryps than other tournaments, after all.”

In order to maintain consistent levels of excitement and activity across competitions, each school had a participation quota. They were, however, allowed to trade with one another. Specifically, Queenvale, the smallest of the schools, generally sold some of its quota to Jie Long, the largest.

But because in the Gryps it was necessary first to assemble team members, and then to have them train together to be able to fight as a unit, the entry barrier was higher than the other tournaments, and so sometimes the quota wasn’t met.

“The mercenary system is a solution to a problem that relates to the very foundations of the Festa, so it’s handled very delicately. Still, it can make the competition more exciting, so there are arguments both for and against it.”

The rules stated that any mercenary participants had to be temporarily enrolled as students, and could participate in the Festa only once. Even the amount of points they earned for their schools was less than that of regular students. And because they had to be in the same age group as regular students, they couldn’t be older

than twenty-two.

"…So they're supplement participants?" Saya's expression seemed to indicate she didn't understand the system either.

"Don't underestimate them, though. In the past, some mercenaries have been former child soldiers for private military companies, with real combat experience. In cases like that, they can be much stronger than even the best students."

"Right. I've heard that a mercenary team came close to winning a while back, and that caused quite a commotion," Kirin added.

Claudia nodded. "Since then, the Executive Committee has seesawed between getting rid of the mercenary system and bringing it back. I would expect Madiath Mesa to make the right decision, though…"

"At any rate, that doesn't change things. Winning the Gryps isn't going to be easy." Julis turned to Claudia. "Hmph, well. I'll join your team. It's not like I have any reason to say no."

"Thank you, Julis… I would be extremely grateful if the rest of you would join, too, but you don't have to answer right now."

"That's odd, coming from you." Julis frowned as if to say, "*What's that supposed to mean?*"

A touch of hesitance showed in Claudia's eyes. "Well—I just wanted to see how you all felt about it. Let's see… Why don't we set the end of this trip as our deadline? After all, something might happen to make you change your minds. If you do, please don't worry yourselves." Claudia's usual cheerful expression soon returned, but there was indeed something strange about her mannerisms.

The others, no doubt having picked up on it, looked to one another uneasily.

*

The Invertia had caused comparatively little damage in Europe, so the great cities had continued to flourish with little outward change. Nonetheless, they couldn't escape the forces of continued urban centralization, and so there was a notable disparity between them and the smaller cities and towns.

After landing at Munich Airport, they took a train to Saya's house. They arrived sooner than expected, in a little under an hour, but even so, it was approaching evening. The sun had already

begun to set, so they decided to stay the night.

Saya's family lived in a two-story home in the Munich suburbs. It looked like a renovated brick house too old to live in, so a lot of work must have been done on the inside for the family to occupy it. Looking carefully, one could also see various sensors installed by the entrance and around the premises, so it must have had tight security, too.

Though it was sunny, the temperature in southern Germany stayed pretty low in the winter, and there was snow piled up in heaps along the road.

It's freezing, Ayato found himself thinking.

"…I'm back."

Saya, standing at the head of the group, disabled the sensors and locks. Inside, Saya's mother, Kaya, came to greet them. "Oh, so you're finally home, my silly daughter," she said. She held an electronic cigarette between her lips, and her hair was roughly gathered at the back of her head.

"It's good to see you again, Kaya."

"Ah, Ayato. How long has it been? But look at you, haven't you become a fine young man!" Kaya broke into a carefree smile.

Her features and slender figure resembled her daughter's, but unlike Saya, she was very tall, almost Ayato's height. She looked so young, it was hard to imagine she was really Saya's mother.

Claudia stepped forward, bowing her head. "Thank you for letting us stay with you, Mrs. Sasamiya."

"So polite! Are you the student council president at Seidoukan?"

"Yes. My name is Claudia Enfield."

"U-um, and I'm—"

Kirin began to introduce herself, only to have another voice sound out of nowhere.

"Now, now, the doorway is no place to talk. Come on in."

"Wha—?!" Kirin let out an adorable cry as a semi-transparent figure suddenly appeared next to Kaya.

"Souichi, you can't go scaring our guests like that, popping up out of thin air."

"Ah, sorry about that. I wasn't thinking. I could see you, you see." The man scratched his head at Kaya's sharp gaze.

He looked to be around fifty years old. The bearded, glasses-clad figure was mostly the same as Ayato remembered Saya's father,

Souichi Sasamiya.

Well, aside from the fact that he wasn't actually there.

"A hologram…," Julis murmured.

After the Phoenix, Saya had told them that her father had lost his body in a research accident, so they should have known what to expect, but after seeing him with their own eyes, they didn't know what to say.

"Ha-ha, don't look so glum, Ayato. I may have lost my flesh-and-blood body, but it isn't that much of an inconvenience. You might even say this is a more suitable arrangement—for building Luxes, that is."

Souichi grinned. Ayato replied with a forced smile. "…I see."

"Well, we can't stand here all day. My husband is right about that, at least. Do come inside. It isn't much, but I've prepared dinner."

With that, Kaya led them into the living room. The Sasamiyas had outfitted the room in a rather functional manner, without much in the way of clutter or decoration, unchanged from how Ayato remembered it. There was a stack of dishes atop the table that stood imposingly in the center of the room.

"I normally only make enough for myself, so it's been a while since I've been able to cook for a crowd. Come on in, sit," Kaya urged.

Julis and Kirin began to introduce themselves once again.

"My name is Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld. I'm very grateful for your hospitality. Thank you so much."

"I never thought we would have a princess come visit! Please, this house might not be much, but make yourself comfortable."

"U-um, I'm Kirin Toudou. Saya really helped me out during the Phoenix…"

"You needn't be so modest!" Kaya laughed. "I'm sure she caused you all sorts of trouble!"

"N-no, not at all…!" Kirin shook her head violently.

"I must say, I never thought you would make it to the semifinals," Kaya said.

"Ha-ha, but I sure did."

"That's because you're such a doting father, Souichi." Kaya, grinning, tried to pat his hologram on the shoulder.

They may have been different ages and states of matter, but husband and wife appeared to be as close as ever.

"*Well, thanks to you, I've been inundated with offers from*

laboratories and companies from all over the world. It's quite a change of pace! I turned them all down, though," Souichi pronounced, as if truly content.

"You turned them down…? But why?" Ayato asked.

"I'm happy just to have my Luxes so highly regarded. Of course, we need money to live, but we're doing all right for the time being."

"I heard you did some development for Galaxy's research institution, Mr. Sasamiya," Claudia added.

"Well, now. You heard right." Souichi's eyes opened wide in surprise.

Claudia's parents occupied high-ranking positions at Galaxy, so there was a good chance she knew a lot of information that she seldom let out.

"Speaking of which, don't you have a laboratory of your own here, Uncle Souichi?"

"Ah, in the basement. You can't even compare it to the one I used to have in Japan. My body is down there, too, and the factory is running as we speak."

"Your father put all the compensation money from the accident into it."

Good grief, Saya seemed to say as she shrugged.

"That's it! Saya, you'll have to let me adjust your Lux. Let me show you just what I can do—"

"Yes, yes, you can talk about that later," Kaya said, holding back her overenthusiastic husband. "First, let's eat. The soup should be just about ready."

And so, a lively meal began. Even Kirin, though nervous at first, soon opened up, and cheerfully told them all about the Phoenix and how they had rescued Flora.

Kaya presented a delicately flavored Japanese-style meal that—though perhaps rude to say—was really at odds with her personality. The simmered flounder and rolled omelet were of a subdued but delicious taste, and to Ayato, they brought a wave of nostalgia.

In Ayato's home, his older sister, Haruka, had taken over the household responsibilities after their mother had passed away, but it was of course difficult for a student to handle that mountain of chores every single day, especially given her frequent training.

And so the two had often found themselves in the care of their neighbors, the Sasamiyas.

For Ayato, the Sasamiyas were closer to his image of a happy family than his own.

This brings back memories…

Savoring that taste, before he knew it, Ayato found his worries fading away.

*

"Now then, let me show you to your rooms," Kaya said, standing up shortly after they had finished dinner.

"We have two spare rooms upstairs that I thought you could use. Are you all right going two to a room?"

"Of course that's no problem," Claudia answered for everyone.

Kaya frowned. "But you know… How should we divide them? Even if Saya uses her own room…"

"Divide the rooms…?" Ayato repeated, suddenly realizing the issue.

If there were two people to a room, and Saya used her own room, then he would have to—

"I see. In that case, I'll share with Ayato," Claudia announced easily.

"Huh?!"

"Wha—?! What a second, Claudia! Th-think about what you're saying!" Julis blurted out, but the other girl merely tilted her head to the side enigmatically.

"Is there a problem?"

"Of course there's a problem! For a man and woman of the same age to sleep together, that's…"

"Don't worry," she said, laughing. "I trust him. Right, Ayato?"

"Well, um…" Ayato returned a stiff smile, trying to look away from her meaningful gaze.

Claudia always acted like this, so he had no idea how serious she was.

"But, Julis, are you saying you don't trust him?"

"Wha—?! O-of course I do! But I mean… Th-that's a separate matter!" Julis stammered.

"I—I trust him!" Kirin, red-faced, stepped forward just then.

"Oh my, shall I leave him to you, then, Miss Toudou?" Claudia prodded.

"Th-that's…" Kirin stared down at her feet for a short moment

before looking to Ayato with upturned eyes, her small body trembling shyly. “B-but if it’s okay with Ayato, then I…”

“Huh…?”

“I see. It would certainly be easiest to let Ayato decide.” Claudia lightly clapped her hands, while Julis, her cheeks red, glared at him.

“Um…” No matter how he answered, there was no way he was going to come out of this in one piece.

He wanted to run away from this situation, but a keen pressure stopped him from doing that.

“Oh, by the way, I wouldn’t mind if you did do something. In fact, I might even welcome it,” Claudia stated frankly.

“Wh-what?! I wouldn’t!”

There was a short silence.

“…Come on, Mom, stop teasing us.” Saya, sighing, looked reproachfully at Kaya. “He can use my room. There, it’s settled.”

“…Ah.”

And with that, the oppressive mood that had settled around them instantly abated.

It was just as Saya had said—there were actually three rooms, so it wasn’t necessary at all for Ayato to share with one of the girls.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help myself!” Kaya burst into laughter.

“Hmm. Then let’s do that. It is a shame, though.” The student council president shrugged. She must have understood the situation from the very beginning, so she had no doubt just been baiting them.

“…”

Julis and Kirin, on the other hand, looked away in embarrassment.

*

Saya’s bedroom had hardly changed since they were children. It was practically empty, fitted only with a bed, a desk, and a computer, with hardly anything else to catch the eye.

Of course, she had obviously taken many of her belongings to the Seidoukan dorms, including her Lux cases, which were conspicuously absent. However, Ayato doubted her room at the academy was much different from this spartan one.

And that was because, apart from fiddling around with Luxes,

Saya hadn't really had any childhood hobbies. Some of that might have been her father's influence, but he doubted that was the whole story.

Ayato, cloaked in the moonlight shining in from the window, lay on the bed reminiscing.

The night was late, and he had no doubt that everyone else was asleep. But for whatever reason, he found himself meandering through endless thoughts, unable to put his mind at ease.

Maybe it's because I haven't seen them in so long…

He would most likely be in trouble the next day if he couldn't get any sleep, but at least for the moment, he didn't feel too bad.

Then…

"…Nnn."

…silently, the door slid ajar, and someone stumbled inside.

"—!"

Ayato was only a second away from jumping out of the bed when he realized who it was:

"Oh, it's you, Saya. What is it, this late at night?"

He hadn't been able to see her properly at first due to the darkness, but it was indeed the daughter of the house.

She continued to walk toward him unsteadily, without responding.

"Saya…?"

"Nnnnnn…"

She must still be half-asleep.

Her eyes half-closed, her body swaying to and fro drowsily, she collapsed onto the bed with a thud. Ayato rushed frantically to stop her from crawling under the blankets.

"H-hold on a second, Saya!"

When he looked closely, he saw that her pajamas were coming loose, exposing her shoulders and abdomen.

Unsure where to look, Ayato shook her gently, trying to rouse her from her slumber, but she showed no signs of opening her eyes.

"Ha… Saya, your sleepwalking hasn't gone away, huh…"

But he couldn't just leave her as she was. He would have to use his last resort.

"I hope it still works…"

As he pinched Saya's nose, her peaceful breathing and relaxed face underwent a complete change. She knitted her brow and shook her head from side to side, but Ayato wouldn't let go.

This had been the best way to wake her up when she was a kid, and it looked like it still worked.

"…Whuuua!"

Saya jumped up, her face red.

"You're finally awake…"

"? …Huh?" Saya glanced around restlessly, her confusion so complete it was as if a question mark had appeared over her head.

She stared at Ayato's face for a full ten seconds before commenting on where they were.

"Ayato…? What are you doing here?! Did you sneak into my bed?!" She hugged the blanket somewhat comically but exuded a strangely satisfied look.

"No! It was you who snuck in!"

"Huh? But this is my room…"

"Yes, but you said you would let me sleep here tonight!"

"…Oh," she said, finally understanding, tapping her head with her fist. "I must have gotten up to go to the bathroom, and then come back here…"

"I figured it was something like that." Ayato laughed.

Saya bowed her head feverishly. "…I'm sorry, Ayato. Did I wake you?"

"No. I wasn't able to fall asleep anyway. I kept remembering things from when we were kids."

"When we were kids…?" Saya cocked her head, perplexed.

"…Saya?"

"Ayato. Can we talk, for a little while?"

"Ah, sure. I don't mind. What is it?"

She looked directly at him, hesitating for a moment before speaking. "I've always… I've always wanted to apologize to you…"

"Apologize…?" He had no idea what she was talking about. "What for?"

"…After I moved away, we stayed in touch for a while. Do you remember?"

"Of course."

After Saya and her family left, she and Ayato had kept in contact via their mobiles. No matter how far away two people were, in the modern age there were always ways to stay connected. They were in different time zones, and they couldn't call each other all the time, but they decided they would call at least once every three days.

But before they knew it, those three days grew into one week, and before half a year passed, it had grown into one month, until eventually they stopped calling each other entirely.

Losing his childhood friend like that had left him despondent, but he had tried to console himself by saying that that was what happened with kids.

"…I couldn't keep going on like that, so I stopped calling you."

"Huh? Was that what happened?"

He didn't remember exactly how they had drifted apart, but now that she mentioned it, it was certainly the case that he had usually been the one to call her.

"I mean… Before that, we would play together every day, but then all we could do was talk. And even then, only for a short time. I was fine with that, at first, but it became too painful… So I thought, until we can meet again, face-to-face…" She trailed off, despondent under the weight of the memories.

"It's okay, Saya. I don't—"

"It isn't just that." She shook her head sadly. "If I had kept in touch, I might have been able to be your strength when Haruka disappeared…"

"—!" Ayato's breath caught in his throat.

"Even if I couldn't have been your strength, I could have tried to cheer you up. I could have supported you… I'm sorry…"

"Saya…"

"I should have been there. I was always there for you, always, until I wasn't…"

It probably would have been good for him to have had her with him back then; he did agree with that. But there was no changing that now.

"So…you know, you can rely on me. When you need to. Next time, I'll be your strength." She looked up from the bed and took his arm.

Her eyes, staring into his, shone with earnestness, pure and clear.

"I'll be your strength," huh…?

Those were the same words Julis had said to him not long ago.

"Thank you, Saya. I can always count on you."

She nodded, finally showing a soft smile.

"Well then, we had better get some sleep, or—" But before he could finish his sentence, a high-pitched sound suddenly rang out.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“…The alarm system.”

He remembered that security around the house had always been very tight. Souichi said he had installed a system to protect against intruders trying to steal his research, and Ayato himself had been caught by it once as a child.

“Don’t tell me it’s a thief?”

They left the room to find the others similarly standing in the corridor.

“What on earth is that noise?” Julis grumbled, holding back a yawn.

Kirin looked half-asleep as well, rubbing her eyes as if just waking from a dream.

“I wonder whether there’s some kind of emergency?” As usual, Claudia was the only one who remained calm. Her figure was even more mature than Saya’s, and her negligee so thin that it was almost transparent in places. Ayato averted his eyes, not knowing where to look.

“Oh, sorry, sorry. Did I startle you all?” Souichi’s hologram appeared in the corridor as the alarms fell silent.

“What happened?”

“Some folks tried to sneak in through the backyard, but it looks like they ran off as soon as the alarm sounded.”

“Intruders, you mean?”

“Yeah. I’m analyzing the evidence now. They probably work for a rival corporation, or a research institute…”

At this announcement, Claudia’s expression turned serious.

“Well, my security system can stand up to anything some other research institute could throw our way, even if they did have the backing of one of the IEFs. There’s no need to worry.”

And with that, the hologram faded away, dissolving into the air.

“…”

“Claudia?” Ayato asked.

“Yes? Sorry, I was just thinking about something.” She smiled sweetly, as if it were no big deal.

“I guess that’s okay, then…”

Claudia rarely looked so troubled, so he couldn’t say he wasn’t concerned, but if she didn’t want to talk about it, then he couldn’t force her.

“By the way, Ayato…”

“Yes?”

There was something frighteningly tense lurking behind Julis’s voice.

“Did I just see you and Saya come out of the same room?”

“…Ah…”

In the end, it took so long to clear up the misunderstanding that by the time they were finished, the eastern sky was tinged orange with the light of dawn.

CHAPTER 3
LIESELTANIA

“Take care, okay?”

The next morning, Kaya saw them all off at the gate. She wished them well as she gently stroked her daughter’s head.

Saya, looking a little embarrassed, nodded.

It was another sunny day, but the temperature remained cold, and their breath turned into white plumes of mist before their eyes.

“Ah, I almost forgot to tell you. That intruder last night—looking at the data from the sensors, it seems that it wasn’t human.”

“Wasn’t human…? Then what on earth was it?” Ayato asked Souichi—or rather, his hologram, standing beside Kaya rubbing his chin.

Souichi had undoubtedly installed projection devices not only within the house but all around the premises.

“It must have been a wild animal or something like that. It probably came out of the forest.”

Since Saya’s house was located on the edge of the suburbs, there was a dense forest only a short walk away.

“An animal…” Claudia sank deep into thought.

All of a sudden, a large black limousine stopped in front of them.

A young girl in a maid outfit—Flora—stepped down from the passenger seat. “Hello, everyone! I’ve come to pick you up!” she exclaimed enthusiastically, giving them an extravagant bow.

“You’re as energetic as always, Flora.”

“Yep!” she replied simply, brimming with pride.

Only a few months had passed since the Phoenix, but she seemed to have grown a little taller. *She’ll certainly be quite the beauty in a few years*, Ayato thought.

“Thank you for taking care of us, Uncle Souichi, Kaya,” he said politely, and they all stepped into the limousine.

The interior of the vehicle was similar to the one in which they had spoken to Dirk Eberwein, but the windows weren’t tinted black, and it didn’t have a table in the center. The front of the vehicle, where the driver’s seat was located, was separated from the passengers’ area by a glass partition. There were three cushioned seats facing the rear of the vehicle, across from which were another two even more spacious seats.

“Your Highness, Master Amagiri, please take the rear seats.”

“Huh? Well, all right…” He didn’t know whether there was special meaning behind the seating arrangements, but he didn’t really have any reason to refuse the suggestion, so he sat down on the seat next to Julis as instructed.

“Okay then, let’s go!” Flora exclaimed, and the stern-faced driver started the engine without a word.

“How long will it take to get there?”

“Hmm… From here, probably around two or three hours.”

“Wow, it’s closer than I expected.”

“Lieseltania is a small country, in the mountains on the border between Germany and Austria, after all.” After answering Kirin’s question, Julis addressed her companions across from her. “Well, we have a little time, so I suppose I had better tell you all a little about it. But it looks like there’s someone here who can correct me if I make any mistakes.”

Claudia laughed softly. “Hee-hee. I wonder who that could be?”

“…Haah…” Julis released a long sigh, glancing out the window. “To start with…okay. The territory that is now Lieseltania was originally part of the Holy Roman Empire. It became an independent country after the Empire collapsed…and lost that independence with the German Revolution. So it existed as an independent country for around a hundred years.”

Perhaps because Saya’s house was at the edge of the suburbs,

almost from the start of their journey the scenery outside changed to one of row upon row of snow-laden trees. Watching those trees fly by, Julis continued, “It would have been for the best if it had ended with that, but unfortunately, Lieseltania was dragged out of its coffin after the Invertia. During the Reconstruction, a class-one grade Vertice Meteorite was discovered in the territory of the former kingdom.”

The meteorites that had fallen to Earth during the Invertia were called Vertice Meteorites in order to distinguish them from the regular kind.

“Class-one grade meteorites are extremely rare, right?” Ayato asked.

“Indeed, there has been only a dozen or so such meteorites discovered thus far,” Claudia replied.

Vertice Meteorites were graded based on their manadite content, with the class-one grade referring to specimens with a purity rate of more than ninety-five percent—in other words, composed almost entirely of manadite.

The technology to create artificial manadite had since been developed, but the products of such processes could hardly match the quality of the real thing. Moreover, such technology hadn’t existed during the Reconstruction, so securing the world’s manadite deposits had been a top priority of the integrated enterprise foundations.

“The size of the deposit is quite small compared to many of the others, but there’s also an overall smaller amount of Vertice Meteorite material in Europe, as the damage caused by the Invertia was itself comparably less here than in other parts of the world. It’s only natural that the IEFs would want to get their hands on as much class-one grade material as possible. And Europe is the home territory of Solnage, Frauenlob, and EP, after all.”

Julis took a breath as she watched her three companions in turn. “But the location proved to be a problem. As I said, the territory of the former kingdom of Lieseltania had become a border zone. Both Solnage, based in Germany, and Frauenlob, based in Austria, had a great level of power. Both parties were ready to go to war over it…but the risk posed by military conflict to the European economy, which was just starting to stabilize during the Reconstruction, was deemed to be too great, so the other IEFs stepped in to mediate.”

“They might have called it mediation, but they certainly had their eyes on the leftovers.” Claudia smiled as she spoke, but her voice spat venom.

“And once the profit-sharing agreement was completed, the integrated enterprise foundations came to the conclusion that if they were going to have to share anyway, they might as well take the opportunity to build their own little miniature garden where they would be free to do whatever they liked. Even though the existing states already didn’t have any power to resist them, the integrated enterprise foundations figured they could use that framework for their own benefit. And so the former kingdom of Lieseltania was reborn. Which is why, in my country, every government policy, from tax rates to guarantees of status, are designed to perfectly suit the IEFs—essentially, legal tax avoidance, and legal immunity for core staff.”

“…In other words, it’s a puppet state?” Saya asked.

“If you want to put it that way.” Julis shrugged, albeit with a grimace. “Which is also why the IEFs all maintain their own research facilities around the Vertice Meteorite. Like I said, there are no airports in Lieseltania, but maybe it will be easier to understand if I told you that those research institutes all have their own runways and maintenance facilities.”

“Since there’s a high level of mana concentration around the Vertice Meteorite deposit, it’s ideal for meteoric engineering research,” Claudia added for clarification.

The level of mana concentration, of course, varied from place to place, but there was certainly data to suggest that Genestella were more likely to be born in areas with higher concentrations.

“That isn’t to say that the country itself is poor. We do get some benefits from the IEFs. Even if the degree of those benefits is completely disproportionate.” Julis tacked the last part on, biting her lip in frustration after.

From her explanation, it wasn’t hard to see that Lieseltania was a country caught in the middle of a complicated situation.

While Julis had been speaking, the scenery outside the window had gradually changed to one of magnificent snow-covered mountain ranges. Compared to the plains, there was a much greater volume of snow collected along the sides of the road. If there was this much snow at this time of year, Ayato could only wonder what the mountains must look like when winter well and truly came

around.

"Ah! Look, you can see the capital, Strell!" Flora exclaimed innocently, looking back to face them from the passenger seat.

It seemed they had crossed the border without even realizing it.

"Ah…"

They looked out the front window, and watched as a town much larger than they had imagined came into view around the edge of a pristine lake surrounded by seemingly endless mountains. Historic houses made of brick and wood stretched out in all directions, just like an old painting of a European townscape. A number of large buildings stood lined up in rows in what appeared to be the center of the city, and railway tracks crisscrossed the streets here and there.

"So this is Strell, the capital of Lieseltania," Kirin murmured, fascinated. "It's beautiful…"

"Well, it isn't really all that different from most other towns… Huh?" Julis frowned.

"What is it?"

"No, it's just that this is a pretty roundabout way to the Royal Palace… Flora?"

"Um, His Majesty ordered us to come this way…"

"My brother?"

"Yes. Please wait a moment." Flora, in a practiced manner, retrieved a folded memo from her pocket, opening it delicately.

The car seemed to be heading along the main street leading into the center of the city. Moreover, its speed had decreased markedly.

"…Does it look to you like there's a ton of people out and about?" Saya whispered, her forehead pressed up against the window.

"Um, he says, 'Enjoy your victory parade on your way home.'"

"Wha—?!" Julis seemed about to jump up, when a wave of excited cheers welled up outside the limo.

"Wow!"

"A-amazing…"

They had heard their fair share of cheers during the Phoenix, but the enthusiasm that ran through the crowds rivaled even that of the finals.

"Your Highness!"

"Princess Julis!"

The crowds overflowed along the sides of the road, with Julis's

name being chanted from everyone's lips.

Confetti in every color imaginable rained down from above, tossed down by yet more waving people sticking their heads out of every house and building.

The crowds of men and women of all ages were so large, they wondered if every last citizen of the capital was there lining the streets.

If one looked carefully, one could see, posted here and there around the streets and in empty windows, posters with Julis's image announcing her triumphal homecoming.

"Ugh, brother. I'll remember this…!"

"You're extremely popular, Julis."

"Being a princess must be really something…"

Saya and Ayato, overwhelmed by the celebratory atmosphere, stared outside in frank admiration.

"It sure must be," Claudia said, laughing softly. "It's the first time in all of Asterisk's history that a princess has won the Festa, after all. There's no need for me to explain how newsworthy that is here, now is there? You both left dealing with the media to the Academy, so you probably don't realize yourselves just how famous you've both become in the wider world. Julis in particular has become a celebrity to rival even Sylvia Lyyneheym," she explained with an amused chuckle.

"Yep! Thanks to Your Highness's victory, the number of tourists has shot up, too!"

"Really? Wow…"

In that case, such tourists were undoubtedly mixed into the huge crowds that lined the road.

"You shouldn't speak as if it's all about someone else, Ayato. Your own home seems to be getting quite a bit of attention as well, you know."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It's just like what Miss Sasamiya's father said the previous day. She might not have made it past the semifinals, but he still has been flooded with offers. Just think how popular the dojo of the winner's Amagiri Shinmei style must be."

"No way…" His father hadn't said anything when they'd spoken.

"Well, the Academy will help look after things in that regard, so you can rest easy."

"…"

Ayato's father was the sort of teacher who gave his students the freedom to come and go as they pleased, and had never been particularly passionate when it came to gathering disciples. Especially since Haruka had disappeared.

Maybe I should call him later…

If this was going to cause some kind of trouble, he'd better say something to apologize, he thought.

"Master Amagiri! Master Amagiri!"

"Huh?" He had sunk deep in thought when he suddenly heard his name. He glanced up in surprise to see Flora looking across at him impatiently.

"Please respond to them, Master Amagiri, like Her Highness."

"Uh, um… M-me?"

"Yep!" Flora nodded.

"It's just—why me?"

"Because you're Her Highness's tag partner!"

"Ah, I guess that's true…"

He glanced at Julis, who was waving through the window to the crowd with a rare—albeit somewhat stiff—smile.

An even louder wave of cheers rolled through the crowd in response.

"Don't be so surprised, Ayato. You're well aware of Julis's strong sense of responsibility, aren't you?" Claudia said with a smile and a soft chuckle.

"…Responsibility, huh?" As a princess of Lieseltania, she certainly didn't take that lightly, that was for sure.

And there was no mistaking the fact that he too, as her tag partner, shared in that responsibility.

"Right, got it."

Resigned, he tried to wave through the window like Julis. He felt more than a little embarrassed, not to mention uneasy.

His expression was undoubtedly even stiffer than her own.

And now that he was paying attention to it, the crowd wasn't just calling Julis's name—a significant number of people were calling his, too. He began to feel more and more self-conscious.

"They're really enthusiastic, aren't they…?"

"…I wasn't expecting this…"

Sitting across from them, Saya and Kirin, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying it all.

“Like Julis said earlier, this country is caught in the middle of a very complicated situation. This might not be a very articulate way of putting it, but this is clearly a good opportunity for people to let out some stress,” Claudia said, before lowering her voice. “That said —I don’t think that’s the only reason behind all this…”

*

The Royal Palace of Strell was on the opposite shore of the lake across from the city center, and was currently being used as the official residence of the royal family. It was a massive brick building, said to have been constructed more than two hundred years before.

The parade lasted longer than Ayato had expected. When they finally arrived at the Royal Palace, Julis, her face almost purple with anger, took off through the imposing corridors.

Her companions, at a loss about what to do next, had no choice but to follow her.

They soon reached a door on the second floor, which Julis pushed open without knocking.

“Brother! What is the meaning of all this?” she called out, her voice filled with anger.

Her companions, behind her, cautiously peeked into the room.

The room was luxurious, but it gave off a somewhat gaudy impression as well. The furnishings were all first-rate, but the room was excessively decorated, fitted with a massive desk close to the window, a huge, gently curving sofa, and even a multitude of paintings on the walls. None of it seemed to suit the room—nor, for that matter, its occupants.

A man, lying on the sofa with his head in the lap of a curly-haired woman, slowly lifted himself up.

“Ah, so you’re back. Welcome home, Julis.”

He looked to be in his mid-twenties, with long, dark-red hair, and a thin physique. Dressed in sneakers and pants, this man seemed to be most at odds with his surroundings.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Julis. And Claudia, too,” the woman on whose lap the man had been resting drawled with a gentle smile.

“Sister-in-law, please excuse me for disturbing you. I’d like to speak with my brother for a moment.”

“Of course,” the woman replied innocently, standing up beside

the man, and giving them an elegant curtsy. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

“And you must be the students from Seidoukan Academy. I’m so happy that you accepted my invitation. I’m Julis’s brother, Jolbert, the present king of Lieseltania. And this is my wife, Maria. These are my private quarters, so please, make yourselves comfortable.”

At these words, everyone but Julis and Claudia stared wide-eyed at the man.

“…Huh?”

Julis had called him her brother, so there was no denying it, but—

“…His Majesty…the King?” Saya stared at him dubiously. “Really?”

“Not what you were expecting? Did you think that I would be wearing a crown, or maybe a cloak?” He laughed cheerfully, but Ayato, too, had been taken by surprise.

Usually, when one imagined a king, the picture that came to mind was of a somewhat stately, dignified figure. Jolbert was nothing at all like that, or at the very least, he was a thoroughly stripped-down version. His features and hair were similar to Julis’s, but his personality and bearing were very much the opposite.

“I do wear a suit for my official duties, you know. I have today off. Or should I say, there isn’t usually much work that needs my attention.”

“Forget about that for a minute, brother! You didn’t say anything to me about that victory parade! I thought I told you not to make a big deal over it!”

“Well, you would have been opposed to it if I had mentioned it,” Jolbert said indifferently, easily turning his sister’s anger aside.

“Of course I would have! But even if you take me out of it, what were you thinking, dragging Ayato into it like that?!”

“Ah, well, it was a one-of-a-kind opportunity, you see.”

“Have a little common sense! You’re supposed to discuss these things with people first!”

“All right, all right. I’m sorry. Please forgive me, everyone,” Jolbert said, smiling wryly to Ayato and the others. “But you know, Julis, the people aren’t only interested in you. They also wanted to see your tag partner, Amagiri here. After all, he’s the partner that you, their princess, chose.”

It looked like he had hit the mark. Since Julis was well aware of her position, he no doubt knew that by combining the two issues, she would not be able to argue the point as strongly.

It was like they said—when it came to siblings, they understood one another's weaknesses well.

"…Oh, and is it only the people who are interested in them?" Claudia glanced at Jolbert, her tone hinting at something.

"Oh dear, you're as sharp as ever, Lady Enfield."

"…What's that supposed to mean?" Julis asked suspiciously.

Jolbert dodged her question with a hearty laugh. "About that, I might borrow a little of your time later. There's a lot I'd like to talk about, both with you and Amagiri."

"Well, I don't really mind, but…" She glanced at Ayato, who hastily nodded.

"Um, okay. I mean, of course."

He suspected he already knew what the king wanted to discuss, and there was no way he could turn him down.

"Oh, and I should thank you all for saving our young maid," Jolbert added, looking them over slowly. "So I decided to hold a ball in your honor. I hope that you'll all be able to come. Oh, and I've had some clothes prepared for everyone, so please choose whichever you like. There should still be time to make adjustments if the sizes aren't right."

"This is the first I've heard of that, too, brother!" Julis again raised her voice in anger.

"Well, there's no problem, is there?" Jolbert laughed coolly.

"…He sounds like a very unique person," Kirin said delicately as she glanced toward the confused Ayato.

"Ha-ha…" He could only answer with a bitter smile and a brief laugh. At the very least, there was no doubting that Jolbert knew how to get his way.

Shortly afterward, Ayato and the others were shown to a detached villa on the grounds of the Royal Palace.

The two buildings were within walking distance of each other and connected by an enclosed path.

On their way there, a magnificent baroque garden spread out before them. They couldn't help but stop in amazement. It was coated in a layer of snow, but that pure-white landscape, unmarred by even a single footstep, was a sight to behold.

"Wow, it's beautiful…," Kirin said in admiration.

“Yep! And it’s even more beautiful in the spring, when the flowers come out! It’s Her Highness’s favorite spot. She takes care of them all herself!” Flora shone with pride.

There was no doubting that when the seasons changed, an altogether different kind of beauty would replace of the quiet tranquility before them now.

“That’s enough of that, Flora. Let’s keep going,” Julis said curtly, quickening her pace—and, it seemed, trying to hide a blush.

The others exchanged amused smiles and continued toward the villa ahead.

Its baroque design was similar to the garden but with an extravagance rivaling even the Royal Palace’s. Part of the building was used as the official residence of the royal family, with the remainder of it serving as a guesthouse for honored visitors. According to Julis, the royal family also had quarters in the Royal Palace, where Jolbert usually resided, but she preferred to stay here.

Unlike at Saya’s house, they were lodged one to a room—each of which seemed larger and more extravagant than necessary.

Ayato found himself unable to calm his thoughts, but at least he would be able to catch his breath. Yet, no sooner had he thought so than Flora appeared at the door.

“Master Amagiri, I’ve brought you your eveningwear.”

“Ah, the one King Jolbert mentioned?”

“Yes, indeed! I need to check the size, so could you try it on for a moment?”

“Ah, okay. But more importantly, what do you think about this ball? It’s the first time I’ve ever gone to one, you see…”

It was quite rare, after all, for a regular high school student to be invited to a royal ball. He had acquired the basics of social etiquette, thanks to his sister’s strict upbringing, but this, he felt, was on a whole other level.

“Hmm… I don’t really know either, but it was organized all of a sudden, so I don’t think it will be too big an event.”

“I hope not.”

He wasn’t Julis, but he didn’t like to be fussed over, either.

In the middle of their conversation, Flora moved around to take his measurements, jotting down an endless stream of numbers in a small notebook.

“But I guess it can’t be easy for you either, Flora. It looks like

you've been saddled with all kinds of work."

"Not at all! I'm only here thanks to His Majesty, so I have to do everything I can to repay him!"

"I see…"

"Besides, compared to getting everything ready for the ladies, the preparations for the men are so much easier."

"Ah, it must be a bit of a challenge to get everything right for them."

"It is."

In Ayato's experience, women generally took their time getting dressed, even for casual occasions. He could only imagine how much must be involved for events like this.

Which was why he waited until late afternoon before visiting, when, he suspected, the others would have finished their preparations.

After knocking on the door Flora had shown him, he called, "Julis? Can I come in?"

"Y-yes. It's open," came Julis's nervous response.

He opened the door, puzzled at her unusual tone, and froze in place.

From what Flora had told him, these were Julis's private quarters. Like her room in the school dormitory, they were overflowing with potted plants, a private botanical garden.

But that wasn't what had stopped him in his tracks.

Rather, it was the four young ladies themselves—he had become lost in admiration at their enchanting figures.

"Wh-what are you staring at us like that for?"

"That's right, Ayato. It's proper manners at times like this to praise a woman's beauty."

"…Agreed."

"N-no, I-I'm sure it doesn't look good on me, so you don't have to force yourself…"

Julis and the others were each wearing different but individually dazzling dresses.

The gowns were floor-length and hid their feet but left their arms and backs largely exposed—especially Claudia's and Kirin's, whose modest necklines served to emphasize their ample cleavage. Ayato didn't know where to cast his gaze.

Julis was wearing a crimson one-shouldered dress, and Saya had donned one that looked like a long white camisole. Claudia's

was an elegant purple, while Kirin's, by contrast, was a chic black.

"…Ah, er, sorry… They look wonderful on you all." Ayato snapped back to his senses, embarrassed.

He couldn't really say whose was the best—the dresses suited each one.

"Thank you very much, Ayato," Claudia laughed. "Your outfit sits very well on you, too."

He was wearing a dress suit—a three-piece tuxedo—and had his hair combed back.

He didn't really like formal outfits, but there was no getting around it this time.

"Well, I wanted to escort Ayato myself, but since you and he are the stars of the show, I'll bite my tongue. But in exchange, I want you to think about us all later," Claudia said to Julis, giving her a light push.

"I-it's not like I have a choice or anything… H-here," Julis stammered, holding out her hand.

Ayato stood for a moment in confusion, until Julis, with a strained smile, put her arm through his.

"S-sorry!"

"Don't worry about it. I know you're not used to this kind of thing. I'll lead you," Julis said softly, chuckling.

He couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed—that was supposed to be the man's role, after all—but he trusted her.

"Everyone, it's time to go! Are you all ready?"

Flora had burst into the room. Her voice made her sound a little uncertain, but she'd mustered some courage to call out to the group grandly.

*

"Phew…" Ayato began to let out a deep sigh but held it down.

"Ha-ha. You look tired." Julis, standing beside him, offered him another drink with a slight laugh.

"Of course. I didn't think there would be this many people…"

Even though Flora had said it wouldn't be a big event, a bewildering number of guests were milling about the villa's spacious hall. The invitees, it seemed, were all either related in some capacity or another to the integrated enterprise foundations, or else members of Lieseltania's political elite.

Julis and Ayato, being the guests of honor, were halfway through greeting each guest individually, but Ayato was already exhausted.

"This might not be the best time to ask," he began, "…but I thought you said your family had no money?"

The hall was illuminated by a set of brilliant chandeliers, and the invitees were being catered to by a small army of waiters and attendants; plus, there were mountains of food and drinks on the tables along the walls. Ayato couldn't even begin to imagine just how much this ball must have cost.

"I told you, didn't I? That even though there's a lot of money used on us, there's nothing for me to use myself. And besides…my brother is different."

"What do you mean?" he asked when her eyes turned to Jolbert.

Despite the ball's ostensible purpose, the young king was the center of attention, standing across the hall chatting with several guests. He was in formal dress—quite unlike his daytime attire—looking for all the world like a completely different person.

"My brother gives the IEFs what they want, after all. He doesn't assert himself politically, and he isn't particularly passionate about his work. It's probably fair to say that there could be no better puppet. The foundations are very happy with him, and so are willing to overlook his selfishness. In return, he takes full advantage."

It was a blistering assessment of her own brother, but despite her words, there was something sad lurking behind Julis's eyes.

"Even so, I don't think that inviting us all here like this was entirely his idea. There's no doubt he wanted us to come, but the IEFs must have supported him, or maybe even suggested it from the beginning."

"It sounds more complicated than I thought… Huh, wh-what?"

Like Julis, he had been watching Jolbert when he suddenly noticed something strange. The king was surrounded by several women, each of whom followed him everywhere he went throughout the hall. Queen Maria was among them, but the others too were being surprisingly intimate.

"…Oh, them. They're my brother's mistresses."

"What?!" At this casual explanation, Ayato almost dropped his glass. "Mistresses? Out in the open, like that?"

Society's sense of ethics and morals might have become somewhat looser than in the past, but most countries in Europe still followed strict religious monogamy. It was true that social disparity was widening, and there was no denying that there was a tendency for people to turn a blind eye to the immorality of those above them—but they weren't living in a polygamous society, so it was common sense that the man ought to at least feel some guilt about it.

But what was strangest of all was that Maria, his lawful wife, was laughing along joyfully with those mistresses.

"The IEFs are behind them, so no one will complain. And to be honest, my sister-in-law is the same. I won't call them spies, but more than half of those women must have their own agendas. The foundations will take any opportunity to place their pieces near him." Julis gulped down her drink distastefully.

"Even Maria…?"

"Well, I suppose it's a good thing my sister-in-law is such an airhead. She, at least, doesn't seem to have any ulterior motives. And my brother investigated her thoroughly before they got married. I don't dislike her or anything… I mean, everyone knows about the mistresses. The people think of him as their promiscuous and mediocre, yet lovable and charming king." Julis's expression suggested she was trying to keep her emotions in check.

"I-is that Claudia?!" Ayato blurted out, watching as she approached Jolbert.

He had no idea what they were talking about, but the fact that she could speak to the king so comfortably in the middle of such an extravagant event suggested she was used to this kind of situation.

"Did you know that her mother is an executive at an IEF?"

"Ah, I heard a little bit about that…"

"She was formerly in charge of this area. She was the one who introduced my brother to Maria in the first place. Afterward, she was promoted to an executive position, and Claudia's father took over her responsibilities. It was with her father that Claudia started coming to Lieseltania. We didn't have much to do with each other back then, though. I've probably told you before, we were just acquaintances, maybe seeing each other during the Opera Ball. It was only after going to Asterisk that she started to meddle in my affairs."

"Wow…" He hadn't known that. "So is her father an executive,

too?”

“No. He might be her mother’s secretary, or maybe her subordinate, but I doubt he’s an executive.”

“…What makes you think that?”

“I’ve seen him a few times. He was too human,” Julis said flatly. “Executives at the IEFs lose that.”

Ayato remembered the conversation he’d had with Helga about Danilo.

“He seems like a much better person than her mother. At the very least, you can see that he loves his daughter.”

“Huh…” In that case, he had to be a good father.

“Um, Your Highness?” Flora appeared in front of them, flustered. “His Majesty asked me to get him a certain bottle of wine, but I don’t know where to find it…”

“Oh. I see. You’re still an apprentice, so they won’t let you into the wine cellar… How could he have forgotten that…? Sorry, Ayato. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Sure. I think I’ll go get some fresh air.”

After watching Julis lead Flora away, he headed for the terrace, but stopped when he noticed Kirin.

“…Um, y-yes… No, I…” She was surrounded by a number of guests and seemed to be drowning in conversation, her eyes darting this way and that as if she was about to burst into tears.

No matter how you looked at her, she was particularly attractive that day, and the men invited to the ball were quite assertive, so it wasn’t altogether surprising that they were trying to speak to her.

“Kirin! Do you have a moment?”

“Ah! Y-yes! Sorry, please excuse me.” No sooner had Ayato called out to her than her expression brightened. She hastily made an exit, rushing over to him.

“Thank you, Ayato.”

“You’re welcome.”

The young man smiled, while Kirin, relieved, lowered her eyes. “I… I’m not very good at dealing with people, especially talking to strangers…”

She was very talkative when it came to swordsmanship, but surprisingly reserved about almost everything else, so it was evidently difficult for her to wade high society all by herself. “Besides…,” she added, “I’m not as pretty as the others…”

“Huh? That’s not true.”

“B-but, this kind of outfit… It doesn’t suit a kid like me.” She hung her head pitifully.

That’s Kirin for you—no self-confidence.

Ayato stopped, heaving a big sigh, and turned toward his friend. “I told you before. That dress looks really good. You look incredibly grown-up, and…beautiful.”

“Wha—?!” Kirin’s face turned scarlet.

It might not have been the most eloquent way of saying it, but a fact was a fact. That chic dress turned her still innocent features into those of a mature young lady. It was a different kind of beauty from Julis’s and Claudia’s, who always had an air of elegance—more vivid.

“Th-thank you… Ayato…” She whispered in a voice so faint he almost didn’t catch it.

“S-sure. Um, should we go out to the terrace?” he replied, somewhat embarrassed. Before he could keep walking, however, Kirin grabbed his sleeve.

“U-um… Can I ask you something?”

“Huh?”

“W-won’t you link arms with me…? Like you did with Julis, a little while ago? It looked so wonderful…”

“Sure, I don’t mind… But I don’t know if I’ll be able to be a proper escort.” After all, he had been relying on Julis to guide *him*.

“Th-that’s okay! I just want to know what it’s like…”

“…Okay.” He offered his left arm.

Kirin approached nervously, wrapping her right arm around his.

But maybe because she wasn’t used to it, it was more like she was holding on to him with all her strength. They weren’t linking arms so much as she was embracing him. When Julis had accompanied him, she had simply rested her hand on his arm, so he hadn’t been particularly aware of it, but now Kirin’s soft breasts were pushing against him.

Moreover, the dress she was wearing revealed much more than her usual uniform.

“Um, Kirin? Maybe you could hold on a little less tightly…”

“Huh? Oh, I-I’m sorry…!” she blurted out, when—

“…Not fair, Kirin.”

“Wha—?!”

All of a sudden, Saya appeared on his right, grabbing his other

arm.

Taken by surprise, he ended up pushing his arm farther into Kirin's bosom.

"S-Saya! What are you doing?!"

"…I want to hold your arm, too. It's a fair demand."

"But you don't need to jump out of nowhere like that!"

On his left, it felt like Kirin was embracing him, and on his right, as if Saya was clinging to him…or rather, pulling him.

It was hard to say that he was merely linking arms with either of them.

And everyone around was staring at the scene they were making. *This can't look good*, he thought. He would have to take refuge on the private terrace as quickly as possible.

"Ha-ha-ha," came a deep, rumbling laugh from behind. "Now that's what I call having a flower in either hand! I'm jealous."

They turned around to see a gentlemanly, middle-aged figure with a neatly trimmed mustache smiling at them.

"Ah, forgive me. I overheard, you see…"

The man wasn't among those whom Ayato had greeted earlier.

"But that's the privilege of youth. Yes, most splendid. I should have expected no less from someone who did so well in the Phoenix."

"Ah… Thank you."

"By the way, do you intend to participate in the next Gryps? They say that you'll be joining Miss Enfield's team."

"No, that's still…," he trailed off. He couldn't afford to give a careless answer here.

"Hmm, I see. You would be best not to, for your own good."

"—!"

No sooner had he spoken than his smiling visage fell away. His eyes gleamed threateningly as a dangerous aura consumed him.

Saya and Kirin let go of Ayato at once, preparing themselves for an attack.

"…What do you mean?" Ayato asked guardedly as he began to slowly edge away.

The man in front of them was a Genestella, and a powerful one at that.

"Just what I said. There's someone who would be quite upset if you decided to join Miss Enfield's team. My job is to prevent that from happening… So I came here to ask you in person," the man

said courteously, albeit with a too-broad grin.

The others in the hall had all noticed the situation. Murmurs spread like ripples throughout the space, and those standing around them began to distance themselves from the building confrontation.

"And if we refuse?"

"That would be most unfortunate. It pains me to have to deal with my juniors this way." At that moment, a violent burst of mana engulfed the man. "I leave you in this one's hands."

All at once, a complex magic square floated into the air, from which a gigantic creature began to emerge.

At first glance, it looked like a lion, but there was no comparison as far as size was concerned—it must have been at least five meters long. Moreover, it had bat-like wings, and a tail that resembled the head of a snake. It was like a chimera emerging out of the realm of mythology, unlike a real, living creature.

If anything, it resembled the not-dragons that had attacked Ayato and Kirin several months prior. But those creatures had still exuded some kind of life force—the chimera in front of them felt like no more than a lump of pure mana.

"Ayato…" Kirin had undoubtedly realized the same thing. She glanced at him as if about to say something more, only to hurriedly turn back to the problem at hand.

Screams erupted throughout the hall, with the guests running blindly this way and that. Amid the sound of tableware and glasses being thrown aside, the man, standing behind the creature, bowed courteously.

"Well then, I bid you farewell."

"Wait!" Ayato leaped after him, but the chimera flung down a gigantic arm to block his path.

"Argh…!"

Despite its huge size, the creature was surprisingly quick. In that moment, the man disappeared toward the terrace.

"What's going on?!"

Julis and Claudia approached at a run, but there was no time to explain.

"Julis, where's Jolbert?" Ayato demanded.

"His bodyguards have already taken him away. Don't worry about that!"

Fortunately, it looked like the chimera was only interested in the five students, and it was leaving the fleeing guests alone.

Behind them, a squad of what looked like Royal Guard, armed with gun-shaped Luxes, stood in formation ready to fire, but perhaps because there were still guests trying to escape the hall, they had yet to do so.

"Grrrrrr…!" The chimera let out a low, deep roar, its bright-red eyes fixed menacingly upon Ayato.

"…Let's try to lure it outside. The others could get hurt if we fight it here."

"That's all well and good, but do you even have a weapon on you?" Claudia pointed out.

"Ah…" He only then realized he wasn't carrying even a simple Lux, let alone the Ser Veresta. Kirin and Claudia were evidently in the same situation.

"Then I guess I'll have to deal with it," Julis said as she stepped forward, but Saya held out a hand to stop her.

"It's okay. I always carry a Lux on me." She raised the hem of her dress, pulling out a hidden Lux activator.

"I should have expected as much. But, Saya, you can't use that here. It would be a disaster!"

Saya's Luxes were, after all, far too powerful. It was one thing to use them in Asterisk, but in an enclosed space like this, they would only make the situation worse.

"That goes for you too, Julis," Claudia pointed out.

"I can adjust the firepower of my techniques, and I'm much more accurate. Don't lump me together with her," Julis pouted.

"Anyway, I'll drive it outside. Once it's out in the open, you can both deal with it."

"B-but you're unarmed…"

"Don't worry. I've got an idea," Ayato said, stepping forward and slowly releasing his power.

Watching Ayato's movements, the chimera took a defensive stance, but as soon as Ayato came within its reach, it began to swing its arm sideways at him.

"Grrraaaaaaaaar!"

It let out a deafening roar that vibrated through the air, but Ayato jumped aside just in time to dodge the blow.

I hope this keeps the guests from getting caught up in it.

His senses broadening as he entered the state of *shiki*, he could detect the positions of everyone who remained in the hall, and closed the distance between himself and the creature while taking

care so as not to cause any damage.

Once more, the chimera let out a terrible roar, again attacking Ayato with its gleaming, clawed arm. He leaped aside to dodge it, when—

"Ayato, watch out!"

As if having predicted his movements, the chimera's tail swung toward him.

The snake's head at the end of the tail was large enough to swallow a person whole, but Ayato swiveled through the air, using his momentum to deliver an almighty kick that slammed it into the ground.

He landed beside the chimera, atop its crushed snake's head—and caught his breath.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style Grappling Technique—*Chest-Piercing Feather!*"

Slipping underneath the chimera, he kicked upward, aiming at its abdomen with all his strength.

"Grrrgiiiiiiiiii!" The creature's huge body soared through the air as it let out a piercing scream.

Ayato leaped after it, whirling through the air again to deliver another three consecutive kicks to the chimera's face.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style Grappling Technique—*Indestructible Thunder!*"

"—!"

Unable to let out so much as a wail between each of those three powerful strikes, the chimera was thrown across the hall, smashing through the towering windows and onto the terrace.

"Saya! Julis!"

"…Understood."

"Leave it to me!"

He chased after it alongside Saya, who was already wielding her Helnekraum, and Julis, who was gathering her mana. Lying sprawled on the lawn in the courtyard beyond the terrace, the chimera, staggering, tried to lift its huge body.

Fortunately, on the other side of the courtyard was the lake.

"Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis!*"

"…Boom."

The next moment, the fireball and bullets of light made direct contact with it.

"Grrraaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

The explosion danced upward, the creature screaming in mortal agony. Then, in the midst of those flames, the chimera's body slowly melted, the highly concentrated mana dispersing in every direction.

"So it wasn't even a living thing…," Julis muttered grimly.

Ayato nodded, silent.

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"…So it was no match for them at all? This is just insulting, losing to a bunch of unarmed kids," the man, standing at the edge of the lake looking through a telescope, muttered to himself, before snapping his fingers.

At that sound, deep within the lake, something gigantic began to move.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter. I didn't want to have to get too involved in this…but it would be a waste to let this opportunity slip by."

The man spoke to no one in particular as he disappeared into the darkness surrounding the lake.

CHAPTER 4
JULIS AND THE ORPHANAGE

The following day, Jolbert summoned the five students to the Royal Palace.

"Gustave Malraux?"

"Hmm. Well, it looks that way. According to the police, that's the name of the criminal you met last night."

They were in the same room as the day before, and Jolbert's casual appearance was all but unchanged. The only difference was that Maria wasn't with him. It seemed that one of her husband's mistresses was laid up in bed from shock after the incident, and she had gone to call on her. *A truly unusual relationship*, Ayato thought.

The five had been asked a bunch of questions by the police the previous night, but perhaps because of their royal guest status, they were treated politely and released much sooner than they'd expected.

"They're saying that he's wanted internationally. It appears he used to go to Asterisk. Um… Which was it again? The school he went to?" Jolbert folded his arms, seeming to have forgotten. His own Royal Palace had been attacked, but he wasn't taking it very seriously, nor, for that matter, even showing much interest.

"Allekant Académie. He's rather famous over there," Claudia filled in.

"Famous? You mean, by winning a Festa or something?" Ayato asked.

"No. Gustave Malraux was ranked, but he never participated in the Festa. He was one of the people involved in the Jade Twilight Incident."

“That’s it! I remember! He’s the Mage of Primordial Beasts, Echid Nix!” Julis rose from her seat, looking startled.

“The Jade Twilight… You mean the hostage incident? I heard that the commander of the city guard dealt with it all by herself…,” Kirin murmured.

“Indeed. It was the largest terrorist incident in Asterisk’s history,” Claudia nodded.

Ayato didn’t know the details, but he had heard about it once before. It was the incident that had prompted the creation of the redevelopment area.

“…So you’re saying that mustached man was a terrorist?”

“No, the situation is a little more complicated than that. The Jade Twilight was carried out by seventy-seven students, some of whom were sympathetic to the group’s goals, and around a quarter of whom were only interested in financial gain. Gustave Malraux was one of those,” Claudia explained, taking out her mobile device and opening a number of air-windows.

They were all news articles related to terrorist incidents.

“These are all incidents he’s thought to have been involved in. A terrorist can be someone who wants to achieve some sort of political goal, but the fact that he has worked with a number of terrorist organizations, each with drastically different ideologies, suggests he doesn’t have any such motivations.”

“So basically, it’s a kind of job for him… Wait a minute. What do you mean, ‘after’ the Jade Twilight? Didn’t you say that Commander Lindwall took care of it?”

But Claudia, wearing a regretful frown, shook her head. “The leaders of the group and its main members were caught, but seven of those involved managed to get away. Gustave Malraux was one of them, which is why he’s so famous.”

“…I see.” Evading capture by Helga Lindwall would definitely spread one’s name around.

“But there’s still a lot that’s unclear about the Jade Twilight,” Julis said, clearly displeased. “The commander’s report about how the incident was resolved is out in the open, but the events leading up to it, and how it was dealt with afterward, were hushed up by the IEFs. It’s a bit of a taboo topic in Asterisk.”

“So… If he’s a Dante, what kind of abilities does he have?” Kirin asked hesitantly.

It was, of course, Claudia who answered. “Back then, Gustave

Malraux was said to be unparalleled in transubstantiation. As for his abilities…well, like you saw last night, he specializes in creating magical beasts."

"But that thing wasn't actually alive, was it?" Ayato asked. There was no denying that the chimera had moved well, but it clearly wasn't a living creature.

"Of course not. No one has succeeded in creating life, and there are even those who argue that it's impossible on a theoretical level. You could probably call that thing last night a biological model in which the bones, muscles, and tissue all consisted of converted mana."

"Our abilities rely on *imaging*. If we can't *image* it properly, the power of what we produce weakens—while if we can establish firm *images* in our minds, the flow of mana, and their overall power, increases. There's no general standard for it, but if you want to embody a physical substance rather than a phenomenon, it's important to *image* it with as much detail as possible. That monster looked like it was alive. It should be impossible to *image* such a thing, no matter how powerful one's abilities." Julis, the only one among them with that kind of ability, continued to explain it all coolly: "But Gustave Malraux apparently made it possible. Both through his natural abilities and by devoting a huge amount of time to it."

"Time?"

"Those aren't his words, but a number of the arrested terrorists apparently said he would spend several months, sometimes even several years, creating a new beast. And if he has spent that much time on it, he's no doubt *imaged* them down to the smallest detail."

Several years—that was dedication, Ayato had to admit.

"Even so, in principle, it's impossible to convert mana permanently, either into a phenomenon or a substance. Well, maybe not impossible, I guess, but to maintain that thing's huge body over a long period of time, he would have to keep pouring more mana into it nonstop. Which is, of course, impossible, no matter how great one's prana is."

"In that case…?"

"It would probably have dissipated by itself within ten or twenty minutes."

"That sounds pretty useful for terrorist incidents," Ayato noted, impressed. "There would be no need to retrieve it, after all."

Julis broke into a frown. “I see… That’s definitely another way of looking at it— Brother!”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry. I had a late night.”

Jolbert had begun to doze off on the sofa.

“You should be a little more worried! You do realize that it was the Royal Palace that was attacked, don’t you?”

“I thought you guys were the target?”

“Then you should be a bit more worried about your little sister!”

Jolbert laughed. “If I were to worry about every single problem you get yourself into, it would be the death of me.” But there was a brotherly warmth in his voice.

Ayato had thought that the two didn’t really get along, but it seemed he had been mistaken.

“And in the first place, what on earth is the security doing, letting someone like that sneak past?”

“Don’t blame them. This Gustave fellow seems to have had a fake identity at Galaxy’s research institute, and used a real ID to get in. So there’s nothing they could have done to stop him. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“A foundation ID?” Claudia knitted her brow.

“What is it?”

“IDs at the IEFs are only given to people from the head offices or people from groups under the head office’s direct control. It shouldn’t have been possible for him to get his hands on one so easily…”

“He did say something about working for someone. Maybe he has the backing of some organization…? But then, why go to the trouble to make such a request…?”

After all, he had said that someone would be upset if Ayato were to join Claudia’s team.

He might have understood if the man had told them not to participate in the Gryps at all. Indeed, they were the winners from the last Phoenix, and one of the tag teams that made the top four. It was easy to see why the teams from the other schools might see them as an obstacle.

But Gustave had told them not to enter Claudia’s team. In other words, whoever was backing him couldn’t afford to let her team become too strong but didn’t care if they joined someone else’s.

That would mean…

“Ah, right. The police want to assign security to you all. What do think?”

“I don’t need anything,” Julis snapped. “But if anyone else wants them, that’s fine.”

“…But isn’t it the princess who needs protecting the most?” Ayato remarked wryly.

Julis snorted with contempt. “If they’ve got enough resources to follow me everywhere I go, they would be much better off using them to look for this Gustave Malraux. They still haven’t found any sign of him, have they?”

“That’s what the report I received this morning said. And, well, it is true that our force isn’t that large,” Jolbert said, as if it were someone else’s problem.

After some discussion, they decided that they didn’t need any added security.

“Fine. I’ll let them know. You’re probably stronger than our police force anyway.”

If one didn’t look at their organizational capabilities or their competency to carry out duties, and compared them only in respect to their fighting ability, the Asterisk students would certainly come out on top. That was one of the characteristics of Genestella—that they were much better suited to combat than ordinary people were.

Or rather, Genestella who lived in places like Asterisk, where they could actively engage in combat, tended to be far stronger than people in the outside world. Moreover, the restrictions on the use of Luxes, Orga Luxes, and one’s abilities were comparatively lax in such places, so it was much easier for them to gain real battle experience. Even graduates couldn’t compare—after leaving Academic City and returning to their peaceful lives, their combat skills tended to suffer a dramatic drop, even if they trained every day.

The world was far from being at peace, with war and terrorism still common, but even they were controlled at least to some extent by the integrated enterprise foundations, and so battlefield occupations were extremely limited. Regular police and security personnel, of course, had their own kinds of training, but powerful students, like those from the Named Cult, surpassed them.

Yet, that wasn’t to say there weren’t people out there stronger still than the students of Asterisk. They were no match for members of the IEFs’ special operations units, or, for that matter, the large

private military companies, and there were also career criminals like Gustave Malraux who chose to live their lives inhabiting the realm of violence.

"If we had our own army, we might be able to do something, but there's no getting around that."

"Lieseltania doesn't have an army?" Ayato echoed, taken by surprise.

Jolbert nodded. "If there's an emergency, we're allowed to borrow some troops from the foundations. From Solnage and Frauenlob, that is. The other research institutes undoubtedly have their own forces, but they won't move until sparks start flying."

The private military companies and the military divisions that belonged to the integrated enterprise foundations were far superior to the capabilities of the existing nation-states. But even so, military forces were still indispensable to maintain a country's national polity.

"…It really is a puppet state," Saya commented.

"Don't put it so bluntly," Jolbert said flatly, but if anything, he seemed to be impressed. "Our guests of honor *were* attacked, so I do have to take appropriate measures. I'll make sure they don't get in your way, though."

"Fine. Is that all?" Julis said, standing up.

Jolbert held out a hand to stop her. "Hold on a minute. I told you yesterday that I wanted to speak with you and Ayato, alone."

At this, Julis glanced toward her classmate.

He nodded as if to say there was no way around it, and sat back down on the sofa.

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"So what was so important that you had to make the others leave?"

"Hmm, well, there are two things… Which should I start with, I wonder…"

"…It isn't like it matters. Get on with it."

"I see. Then I'll start with the easier one. Amagiri"—Jolbert, smiling, turned to Ayato—"will you marry my sister?"

"…"

Ayato stiffened, unable for a moment to comprehend what Jolbert had just asked.

Julis, beside him, had the same reaction, sitting as rigid as

stone, her face turning scarlet as she began to tremble.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you saying, brother?! Y-you must be joking!"

"Hmm, yes, well, I'm not saying it has to be right away. For now you could just get engaged." Jolbert leaned forward, paying no heed at all to his sister's strained voice.

Ayato, finally coming back to his senses, gave an honest, albeit flustered, response. "I—I don't know what to say, being asked that kind of question all of a sudden… You might have misunderstood, but Julis and I don't really have that kind of relationship…"

"Guh—! Th-that's right! And why are you only asking Ayato?!" Julis snapped, but her brother didn't even glance her way.

"Yes, I've heard about it from Flora. I was a little surprised, to be honest. But that's fine. It isn't really a problem."

"It's a huge problem!"

At that, Jolbert finally turned to Julis. "I'm just thinking about what's best for you, sister. You understand what will happen at this rate?"

"…Hmph. That's none of your business."

But his eyes were deathly serious. Perhaps daunted by that expression, Julis fell silent.

"What do you mean?" Ayato asked.

"It means that in time, she'll end up like me," Jolbert responded, sinking back into his chair.

Ayato still didn't grasp the full meaning of that statement.

"What he's saying is that the IEFs will choose someone for me who suits them."

"—?!" He couldn't believe what he was hearing. In other words, they would force her to marry someone.

"I'm confident I can love anyone, so I was okay with it. But you, Julis…you're different."

"…"

Julis said nothing, but her silence indicated that he was right.

"Which is why you should choose someone you like now, before it's too late. You chose Amagiri here as your tag partner, after all, so you mustn't dislike him, right?"

"O-of course, I don't dislike him…," she murmured, before glancing up. "Don't tell me that was why you organized that parade yesterday?!"

"I thought it would be a good way to introduce you both to the

people."

That explained why Flora had told them to sit next to each other.

"B-but why so suddenly…? It's not like we haven't spoken about this before. And I turned them all down!"

"The situation has changed, Julis. You've won the Phoenix now."

"—!"

Julis caught her breath.

"The foundations weren't pushing as hard before, so I was able to smooth things over, but now that you've won that tournament, you're much more valuable to them. They're all jostling to use you for their own benefit."

"Th-that's…"

"But if we do it now, I can make the first move. There's no need to worry about social status in this day and age, and besides, there's no higher status than victor of the Phoenix, now, is there?"

"Argh…" Julis looked away in frustration.

"So what do you think, Amagiri? This country might not be much compared to Japan, but you know, you would be able to live in comfort, at least. That isn't so bad, is it?" Jolbert said, smiling.

"…I can't argue with that," Ayato answered after a short pause, as if having to convince himself. "I'm sure it would be comfortable… But I wouldn't be free to do as I wanted, either. Would I?"

"There's no such thing as complete freedom. Everyone is bound by obligation to one degree or another."

"But there should be room for us to choose which obligations to be bound by. That's why Julis came to Asterisk, to be able to make that choice."

At this, Julis glanced up at him in surprise.

"Choice, huh…? There are all kinds of people in the world who don't have that luxury, you know."

"That may be so, but…I don't want to be the shackles that tie Julis down," Ayato declared flatly.

Jolbert, silent, looked him frankly in the eye for a short while, before letting out a deep breath. "Hmm… You're more serious than I thought. Fine. Let's put it aside for now." He raised his hands as if to say he had given up. "But can I ask one more thing?"

"What?"

“If Julis herself desires those shackles, would you be okay with it then?”

“Wha—?! B-brother, what are you…?!”

“I…I would have to think about it…”

Watching Ayato’s and Julis’s faces turn scarlet, Jolbert nodded, satisfied. “Hmm, I see. So there’s still hope.”

“I-if that’s all, we’ll be going! C’mon, Ayato!” Julis stood up and, her shoulders squared and face a brilliant-red, headed for the door.

“Wait a minute, Julis. I said there were two things I wanted to talk about.”

She stopped by the door. “…I’m in no mood for any more of your games,” she snarled over her shoulder with a glare.

“Oh, no, it won’t take long.” Jolbert paused before returning to his usual frivolous smile. “Julis, please don’t participate in the Gryps.”

Abruptly, all expression vanished from her face. “Are you serious?”

Her cold, low voice echoed throughout the room. It was as if the temperature itself had instantly fallen.

“Of course I am.”

“Then tell me why.”

“You saw the victory parade, didn’t you? You’re terrifyingly popular among the people right now, Julis. If you keep going, I could end up losing my position, and that would put me in a difficult situation. So can I ask you not to participate in it?”

“…No.” She stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Ayato could tell how angry she was just from the sound of her footsteps fading into the distance. “…Is this okay? She’s really angry, you know.”

“It looks like it. I wonder how many years it’s been since she was last this furious at me?”

“…I had better go after her.” He couldn’t leave her alone in that kind of mood.

But Jolbert called after him. “Don’t worry. I know where she’s going. I’ll let you know when we’re finished, if you’ll stay a little while longer.”

“…What is it?”

“Well, I thought I’d ask you to try to convince her…but judging

by that expression, there's probably no point, is there?"

"…No." Ayato doubted that even he could talk her into doing anything in that state of mind, and moreover, he had no intention of doing so. He had already decided to be her strength.

"I give up…," Jolbert grumbled, scratching his head. But despite his words, he didn't look like he was about to.

"Did you mean it, when you asked that?"

"Didn't I just say so? Of course I meant it. I'm asking it from the bottom of my heart. Think about it for a moment. Just what do you think will happen if she wins?"

"Well… She would be even more popular than she is now, I guess."

"Exactly. I'm telling you, the people of this country are nothing but selfish. Back when she was born, they were all saying how having a Genestella for a princess was terrifying, disgusting even." Jolbert twisted his lips around the words sarcastically. "Anyway, I don't like saying this, but I could end up getting relieved of my position. I'm only allowed to sit on this country's throne because I do what the IEFs expect of me, and don't pay any attention either to politics or work."

It was like the old saying: The lighter the palanquin, the easier the burden.

"It would be child's play for the foundations to orchestrate a change in leadership. And who do you think is next in line to sit on the throne?"

Ayato finally understood.

"…Julis is earnest and kind. She won't be content to leave things as they are. She'll no doubt try to change everything, to help everyone who's suffering. But that's not possible, not in this country, controlled by the IEFs. She knows that only too well. Which is why she went to Asterisk in the first place. She's suffering, too."

Ayato was silent.

"For the time being, at least, I'm still more valuable to them than she is. Or perhaps I should say, Julis is *less* valuable to them than I am. You know that she's defiant, especially where they're concerned. But if push came to shove, they wouldn't have a hard time making her do what they want. They could hold the whole country hostage. So if she were to become more valuable to them than I am…" Jolbert stopped there, smiling sadly.

It was just like their previous conversation about marriage. The more Julis tried to do what was right, the more her position—from a personal standpoint, at least—took a turn for the worse.

"So let me ask you again, Amagiri." Jolbert looked straight into his eyes. "Isn't there anything you can do to convince her?"

"…I'm afraid not." Despite all that, his answer was the same.

There was nothing he could do. After all, she had chosen this path herself, fully aware of its implications.

"I see… I understand." Jolbert leaned back into the sofa, looking up at the ceiling with a forced smile. "I guess there's no way around it. I'll just have to keep playing the role of the benign fool," he said, slowly closing his eyes.

"Jolbert…"

"It's all right. Despite how it might look, I am enjoying my position. And I've no intention of turning it over anytime soon." He opened an eye to glance at Ayato. "She should be at the orphanage on the other side of the lake. Ever since she was a child, she would go there whenever something happened. I'll leave it in your hands."

Ayato bowed deeply to the king as he left the room, then hurried after Julis.

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Unlike the previous day, the sky was hidden behind a layer of thick, leaden clouds.

Snow fluttered down from above, disappearing into the white mist of his breath.

"This must be it…"

The church was around thirty minutes from the Royal Palace by car, perched atop a hill at the outskirts of a shantytown.

It was an old building made of brick and wood, connected to a two-story house. It was much larger than he had imagined from Julis's description, but there was no denying that it was quite worn. A high wall surrounded the building, but it had collapsed in places and no longer seemed to serve much use.

When he stepped into the grounds, he could hear the voices of children playing behind the church. He walked through the thin layer of snow and found Julis engaged in a snowball fight with a group of youngsters.

"It's Ayato Amagiri!" one shouted.

“It really is!”

“Wow!”

The children called out one after the other, and Julis, wearing a thick black coat, turned to face him.

“You got here sooner than I expected. So he told you?”

“Yeah.”

Her tone and expression were calm, but she was clearly annoyed.

“You too. How long have you been here? I came by car.”

Ayato had gone after Julis quickly after her departure. Upon leaving, he’d immediately asked Flora to arrange a car for him (she had been in the middle of something, and so hadn’t been able to go, too), and had even thought he might catch her on the way.

“I used a secret route, one that I’ve used since I was a child. You wouldn’t be able to catch up by car.”

“…I see.”

If a Genestella really wanted to, it wasn’t impossible for them to move faster than a car that was road-bound. All the more so if they were familiar with the path.

“Oh my, I thought they were getting lively. So you’ve come to visit us, Julis.” An elderly sister slowly opened a window from within the church, peeking down at them.

“Sister Therese… Ah, right. This is—”

“It’s okay. Even we watched the tournament. Welcome, Ayato Amagiri,” the sister said, smiling. “I’m afraid we don’t have much to offer, but how would you like some tea?”

“Ah, of course.”

“Wonderful. Then please come in.”

He entered the church with Julis and immediately found the passage leading to the adjoining house.

Inside, several other sisters were hard at work, assisted by a number of children somewhat older than those playing outside.

“The holidays are just around the corner, so we’re all busy getting ready.”

“Oh…” Julis stopped, taking in the scene nostalgically, but soon came back to her senses. “I’m sorry—it’s just like I remember.”

“Did you help out, too?”

“Well…a bit. I don’t think I was much help, though,” Julis said with a complicated expression.

“That’s right.” Sister Therese approached them from across the

room. “When she first came here, she really couldn’t do anything for herself. Rather than helping, it was more like she got in everyone’s way.” She chuckled playfully.

“Stop teasing me, Sister Therese.” Julis smiled gently.

“I’m sorry. But to think that kind of child would go on to win the Phoenix…”

The air between the two of them, smiling happily, struck Ayato as almost like mother and child.

It was only then that he realized Sister Therese was a Genestella.

She led them to the back of the house, to what looked like a small dining room. There, she urged them to sit at a long wooden table with chairs on either side.

“Let me welcome you again, Ayato Amagiri. My name is Therese. I’m in charge of the church and orphanage here.”

Sister Therese sat across from them, while a younger nun brought them some tea. The newcomer greeted Ayato politely and then grinned at Julis, who was sitting next to him.

“Welcome back. I watched the Phoenix. You did it!”

“Well, of course.” Julis laughed.

“Look who’s talking. I remember back when all you did was cry constantly!”

The sister must have been around the same age as her pair of guests. Like Therese, she seemed to be a Genestella. She nudged Julis with her elbow, teasing her playfully in a soft tone. Julis responded in kind. It was obvious they were good friends. Several other sisters about the same age had gathered around.

She looks just like any other ordinary girl…

He felt strangely glad seeing Julis, usually on edge, take on this new, fresh aspect.

“…I’m relieved,” Therese announced suddenly, and it sounded like it was directed toward him.

“Huh?” Surprised, Ayato turned to her.

“That she chose someone like you.”

“No, I’m not—”

“It’s okay. I can tell from the way you were looking at her.” Theresa smiled warmly before turning to the gathered sisters and clapping her hands. “Okay, okay, you had better get back to work if we want to be ready in time for the Epiphany.”

“Yes,” the devotees said in unison, reluctantly leaving.

Once the three were alone, Therese turned to Ayato with a serious expression.

“Now then—please let me express my thanks once more. I’m sorry that Flora caused you such trouble.”

“Ah, no, it wasn’t just me…” Ayato tried to wave her thanks away.

Julis scowled at him in disbelief.

“You say that, but from what I’ve heard, if it wasn’t for each and every one of you, there would have been no saving her. So at the very least, from someone who cares about her very much, please, as a representative of you all…”

“Okay…” He couldn’t argue with her there.

“Besides, it’s partly my fault,” she said, shaking her head in self-reproach. “I should never have let her go by herself. I should have sent one of the sisters with her, whether she liked it or not.”

“Some of the sisters seem to be Genestella.”

“Yes. Four, if you include me. A few more if you include the children.”

Four Genestella around the same age working in the same place, all by chance, was quite unusual. Moreover, he could see from the way they carried themselves that they had received some kind of training.

“Sister Therese is like my teacher, as a Strega.”

“Wow. Is that so?”

“I just tried to teach her how to defend herself. She’s a faster learner than I thought. She’s surpassed me now.”

Julis’s abilities were certainly quite refined for someone who hadn’t received any formal training.

Her timing and the way she lured her opponents into traps must have been based on some kind of theory.

“Forgive me for asking, but did you attend Asterisk once?”

“Not at all!” She laughed. “I only learned a little from a Strega I knew a long time ago. I try to teach all the children how to defend themselves, not only the Genestella. Of course, some don’t like fighting, so not all want to learn…” She spoke nostalgically, but Ayato noticed that she seemed to be gazing into the distance behind him.

He turned around, but there wasn’t anything important in the room. The only thing that stood out was a cozy glass-walled building on the other side of the window.

“Is that…a greenhouse?”

“Yes. It was the favorite place of a child who used to live with us. She was such a gentle child… She didn’t like fighting at all…”

“…”

At that, Julis stood up, her chair scraping against the floor loudly.

“Julis?”

“…Sorry. I need to get some fresh air,” she said.

“Haah…” Therese watched her leave the room sadly, and let out a long sigh. “So she’s still taking it hard…”

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When Ayato went outside, he found Julis surrounded by children.

“I’m sorry, everyone, but I have to go out for a while. Please tell the sisters for me,” she said gently, squatting down at eye level with them.

“Are you leaving already, princess?”

“But you just got here!”

The children all called out disappointedly, but Julis merely gave them all a weak smile, patting them on the head.

“Don’t worry—I won’t be long. Go and help the sisters until I get back, okay? It looks like they’re behind schedule with the preparations for the Epiphany.”

They still looked disappointed, but soon filed back into the building without further complaint.

“Are you okay?” Ayato asked.

“Let’s go for a walk,” she replied, raising her hood and making toward one of the gaps in the wall.

As they left the church, a dreary street lined with run-down houses opened up around them. It felt a little like the redevelopment area in Asterisk, but the scenery was quite different.

The buildings on either side were so old, they looked like they might collapse at any moment, or else they were so shabby, they resembled little more than mountain huts. There were a few buildings that appeared to be apartment complexes, but the walls were full of cracks and covered with graffiti. The road was littered with trash, and in the middle of one vacant plot of land, several people, residents perhaps, sat huddled around an open fire. They were staring into the flames without moving, their eyes dull and

listless, as if robbed of all hope.

The whole town seemed to be suffocating under some unseen force.

"…I'm sorry," Julis finally said, speaking up. "I'm not feeling very well today."

"Don't worry—it happens to the best of us."

He didn't know which part of Therese's conversation had upset her, but it was clearly something quite important to her.

"If I can't even control my feelings, there's no way I can talk to my brother…"

"He's worried about you."

"…I know," she said, biting her lip. "I know he cares about me above everything else, and I know how lucky I am for that." Her voice sounded more like she was reminding herself of those things. "But still… No, *because* of that, I can't let things in this country keep going as they are."

"You're doing your best, we can all see that. And you don't have to worry about the orphanage anymore."

Her wish after winning the Phoenix had been to purchase this orphanage in her home country, and secure funds for it for the future. She might have been extending her helping hand to her own friends, but that didn't change the fact that it was something to be proud of.

"But in the end, that was just like sprinkling water on parched soil. It's the system itself that keeps these people down, that makes places end up like this, and makes children have to rely on the orphanages."

A world dominated by the IEFs was one that would keep on giving birth to economic disadvantage. Its very essence was disparity. Of course, the world had always been like that, for as long as recorded history, but the integrated enterprise foundations did everything in their power to exacerbate it.

"I wanted to free the people from that curse, even if only in this country. If that's not possible, I at least want to fight back against it."

"So…will that be your wish after the Gryps?"

Julis gave a slight nod.

She'd made it no secret that she was aiming for a grand slam. It wasn't enough to just win the Festa once.

"The orphanage was in a very bad state financially. So I

prioritized saving it above everything else. That was my first goal, and I managed to pull it off…" She trailed off. "I know I'm being selfish, probably because my brother always spoiled me. But I…" Pain crept into her voice. Ayato had never seen this side of her before.

"Julis…," he began, but the words wouldn't come to him.

All of a sudden, her gaze shot upward. "—!"

The anguish that had consumed her expression just a moment earlier had been replaced with surprise.

Her whole body was trembling, her eyes wide with shock.

"Don't tell me…"

"Julis?"

She seemed to be staring at a car that had just sped through the slum's streets. It had been moving at considerable speed, and had disappeared out of sight.

"…No, it couldn't be…"

She gritted her teeth, something close to anger burning in her eyes.

"Julis? What is it?"

"I'm sorry, Ayato. Go back to the orphanage. There's something I have to do," she muttered, before dashing off at full strength.

"Julis, wait! What's the matter?"

She might have told him to go back, but he couldn't leave her alone like this, so he chased after her.

They soon left the outskirts of the town, and found themselves surrounded by snow and forest. Julis must have been chasing after the car they had just seen.

The winding road appeared to head toward the mountains. There were no other cars around, so it couldn't have been a major road.

As he had hoped, he was the faster runner. "Julis!" he called out, jumping in front of her to block her path.

"Get out of the way, Ayato! I'm in a hurry!"

"I can see that! But I can't let you go like this! I don't know what's wrong, but you can't rush into things in this state of mind!"

"That's…!" She leaned forward, snarling at him, but quickly lowered her eyes. "Do you think I don't know that? I'm begging you, Ayato, let me go!"

He couldn't turn down such a desperate plea. "…Okay. But I'm going with you."

“Fine.” She nodded, taking off.

After a short distance, she branched off from the road and dashed into the forest without any hesitation, as if she knew exactly where the car was heading.

Proceeding through the snow-covered forest, they finally came across the car, parked in a clearing. Julis slowed down, Ayato following suit behind her.

It was only then that he realized it: There was something strange about their surroundings. The trees were different from those they’d seen before. Looking carefully, he noticed they were stunted and shriveled, as if only barely holding on to life.

The farther in they went, the worse it got, until they thinned into a wide opening around the car. If they could have seen it from above, it might have looked like a gaping hole in the middle of the forest.

Julis showed no interest in the vehicle, instead keeping her gaze fixed on a point in front of her. Beyond the car, a set of footprints led into that plain of pure-white snow.

Ayato continued behind her, until he realized that the ground beneath them felt strange.

He squatted down and brushed aside a section of snow, and then a pungent stench assailed his nose.

Is the soil…rotting…?

The snow, fluttering down around them, seemed to be getting stronger.

It could turn into a blizzard at this rate.

Peering into the distance, he could see the outline of what looked like an abandoned building in the middle of the clearing.

It seemed to have mostly fallen in, and there was little left to discern its original form, but it must have once been quite large.

And in front of it stood a lone shadow.

Julis came to a stop, before calling out to the figure:

“It’s been a long time, Orphelia.”

CHAPTER 5
THE WITCH OF SOLITARY VENOM

Ayato caught his breath at the sound of that name.

"Orphelia," he whispered. "Don't tell me—" A feeling he had never experienced before welled up in his chest—it was indescribable, something unnervingly close to being unsettled, and it took hold of him.

"…Why did you come here?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at them.

She was wearing a Le Wolfe uniform, but despite standing in the middle of the snow, the only additions to that uniform were a pair of long gloves that stretched up to her elbows and some white tights. She wasn't even wearing a coat. Her voice was as cold as ice, dark and hollow as if echoing up from deep underground. There was no failing to take notice of the incredible amount of prana burning through every corner of her body.

But what was most striking of all was her long, white hair, seemingly melting into the snow around her, and her red, ruby-like eyes. Like her voice, there was a darkness in those eyes, similar to a pair of blood moons portending disaster. It was a look of utter desolation that could freeze a person where they stood. But in spite of that, her face was full of sadness, as if she might break out into silent tears at any moment.

"Is it really her…?"

Orphelia Landlufen—two-time champion of the Lindvolus, and the Le Wolfe Black Institute's top-ranked student. She was said to be one of the strongest Stregas in all of Asterisk's history, on a level comparable to even Helga Lindwall.

He recognized her from the news. There was no doubt about it. The young woman standing in from of him was Erenshkigal, the Witch of Solitary Venom.

"It's been nearly a year, hasn't it? I didn't think I'd see you here." Julis's expression was grim, but her voice seemed to be pleading for something.

"I told you not to get involved," Orphelia responded coldly, her mournful expression unchanging.

Julis bit her lip, a shadow of regret clouding over her for the briefest of moments, before turning her piercing gaze on the other young woman. "I wanted to tell you the same thing I said last year. Come back, Orphelia. That isn't where you belong."

"…Don't, Julis. I'm just following my fate. You can't change it." She shook her head weakly, but there was no mistaking her resolution.

"I won't accept it!" Julis all but shouted.

"…" Orphelia looked down in silence, raising a hand to her school crest. "My fate is here now. If you want to change that…"

"Fine, if that's how you want it! But it won't be like last year!" Julis declared, mana beginning to swirl around her.

"H-hold on, Julis!"

"Keep out of it, Ayato!" she yelled without even turning around. "This is between me and her!"

Ayato stopped in his tracks at the steely determination that rang through her voice.

"I'm going to smash that crest this time, Orphelia!" The air shimmered with heat as more than a dozen balls of fire erupted into existence around her, coalescing into burning disks—chakrams of pure flame.

"Burst into bloom—*Livingston Daisy!*" She arched her arm, and the searing chakrams sped toward Orphelia.

But just before they reached her, the disks at the head of the volley spun off course, plunging into the ground.

They instantly melted into the snow, steam and small flakes of ice rising up around them.

It might have been no more than a simple diversion, but it was enough to block Orphelia's line of sight for a brief moment.

And at that very moment, the remaining chakrams parted to either side, catching the frigid girl in the middle of a pincer attack.

Nice move, Julis!

It was the perfect combination of timing and distance.

At the very least, it should have been enough for her to take the initiative, but…

"—!"

…just then, Ayato felt a shiver run up his spine.

Behind that screen of white mist, an unbelievable amount of prana had begun to swell.

The level was beyond what should have been possible. He was confident in the amount of prana he could control, but there was no comparison whatsoever to the young woman in front of him. It kept pouring out, with zero sign whatsoever of slowing, seeming to have no end.

He couldn't even begin to measure that overwhelming force, that ominous surge of energy.

A wave of mana that Julis couldn't hope to match raced forward, sweeping away the spray of snow in an instant. The air itself shook violently as a ferocious outpouring of energy was released, strong enough to crush everything around them into the ground.

And in the middle of it all stood Orphelia's calm figure, a seemingly endless stream of corpse-like arms rising up at her feet like smoke. Those odious, blackish-brown arms writhed around her in a haze, more deadly vapor than solid form.

The arms flew in every direction, catching each of Julis's burning chakrams in midair. The disks struggled to break free, spinning faster and faster, their blades of flame washing over those dead arms in waves.

And yet, those talon-like hands continued to hold firmly on to them.

"So this is Orphelia Landlufen's ability…"

Ayato had heard of it before. Erenshkigal, said to be the strongest Strega in Asterisk, had the power to control a toxic miasma.

"…It's no use, Julis. You can't stop it," Orphelia murmured, her voice filled with sorrow, as the miasma crushed the disks into oblivion.

Ayato finally understood the feeling that had consumed him just before.

It was a warning.

He had understood, on some intuitive level, that Orphelia was

dangerous. Too dangerous. That had to have been it.

Only now did he remember what Helga had said: *She's fundamentally different from you or me.*

He had thought the woman had been speaking metaphorically, but that was a mistake. Instead, she had been stating a simple fact.

The power of the young woman in front of him clearly went beyond that of ordinary humans—even Genestella. He understood it instinctively, just by looking at her.

However—

"It's not over!" Julis bellowed, as if she had been expecting this turn of events, and prepared to launch another attack.

Julis…!

An overpowering wave burst forth from Orphelia, and he froze in place. That Julis was able to continue her attack in spite of it was a source of surprise and admiration for Ayato.

Judging by what Julis had said, the two seemed to have fought against each other before. Which meant she was definitely aware of Orphelia's power. Perhaps that was why she was able to face that overwhelming display of power without faltering.

Without an incredibly strong force of will, it would be impossible not to lose heart against such an opponent.

Or maybe her reason for fighting is so important that she can't afford to surrender…

That was probably it.

“Burst into bloom—*Anemone Coronaria!*”

Julis raised her hands above her head, and a huge flower of flame opened its petals.

That anemone emitted a dazzling explosion of light, like a miniature sun illuminating the snowy field. The scorching heat was so strong that it even reached where Ayato was standing, watching the battle from a distance. This was the first time he had ever seen it, but there was no mistaking that this was one of Julis’s strongest techniques.

“This is it, Orphelia!” she shouted as she swung her arms down, forcing the giant fireball to speed toward her opponent.

But Orphelia, her expression unchanging, merely raised her right arm, palm outstretched.

“Wha—?” Ayato doubted his eyes.

He’d thought she was going to use some kind of defensive ability—but somehow, she managed to stop that giant fireball barehanded.

Her white glove burst into flame, turning to ash in less than an instant, vanishing in the wind, but there was no sign of even the slightest burn to her pale skin.

“I don’t believe it… Did she stop it with only her prana…?”

It was theoretically possible to deflect an attack by focusing one’s prana on defense. But in practice, such techniques usually only reduced the amount of damage sustained. It should have been impossible to completely withstand an attack. One’s prana would be consumed in an instant. Especially considering the strength of that fireball.

Yet, Orphelia’s prana was as strong as ever.

“Impossible…” Julis stood wide-eyed in disbelief.

“…I told you… Your fate is weak…” Orphelia frowned tiredly, before clenching her fist. The huge fireball exploded, fading away like mist.

The miasma spiraling around her sped up in force, the countless roiling arms merging together into one gigantic, serpentine shape.

“Return to the dust,” Orphelia murmured, and that huge, withered arm dived toward the ground, speeding toward Julis.

“Aaaauuuugh!”

She screamed in agony. The roiling mass had caught her.

“Julis!” Ayato cried.

As he watched, it lifted her dozens of meters into the air, and then slammed her down mercilessly.

Ayato leaped forward to catch her just before she could hit the ground, but the miasma’s force was so strong that, once the two schoolmates collided, they were flung almost a dozen meters across the snow.

“Julis, are you okay?!” he pleaded, holding her in his arms.

“Ugnnh…”

She seemed to have lost consciousness. And what’s more, her clothes had started rotting where the arm had grabbed her. Her complexion had turned poor as well.

So this is Erenshkigal’s miasma…

People said that a simple touch of that poison was enough to consume its victims. It looked like that was no exaggeration.

“…Are you Ayato Amagiri?” Orphelia asked, as if only just noticing him. Her gaze was cool, considering him without so much as a shred of interest.

“It’s over! Julis might have been the one to issue the challenge, but any more would be—”

Before he could finish speaking, a cloud of miasma began to rise up around her—or rather, *from* her—building up around her exposed, white skin where her glove had been burned away.

“It’s a pity, but even I can’t stop someone’s fate once it’s been set in motion… You should leave now, if you don’t want to get caught up in it.”

“I can’t do that,” Ayato said, holding Julis firmly in his arms, as he activated the Ser Veresta.

“That’s a shame…,” Orphelia replied, and all at once countless arms sprung forth from the miasma to strike at the pair.

“Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—*Yatagarasu!*”

He swung around, slicing cleanly through those arms before they could reach him.

Orphelia’s eyebrow twitched. “Ah, so that’s the Ser Veresta…”

Her miasma seemed to be impervious to normal weapons, but the Orga Lux, capable of burning through anything, seemed to be a different matter.

It would be best if she decided to withdraw now, Ayato thought—but if she didn’t, he might be forced to fight her.

I don’t think I can win, though…

Holding Julis in his left arm, and the Ser Veresta in his right, he began to carefully back away.

Fortunately, Orphelia neither moved nor seemed to be readying for an attack.

I might be able to get out of this after all, he thought, when his feet suddenly grew weak.

"Wha—?" he gasped, suddenly choking, as if something had gotten caught in his throat. His hand holding the Ser Veresta began to tremble uncontrollably. "Don't tell me…"

"…"

He entered the state of *shiki*, probing at his surroundings. There was clearly something strange about the airflow around him.

Orphelia must have already set up a barrier of miasma around him.

"Ha… Odorless, invisible gas…? I should have seen that one coming…," he rasped.

"…I'm sorry. You'll soon be at peace."

The arms of miasma reached high into the air, preparing to slam down on them.

He could still move, if barely, but it was only a matter of time until they were caught.

But he couldn't give up. He tightened his grip on the Ser Veresta, searching desperately for an opening, when—

"Could I ask you to hold on for a moment, young lady?" came a clear, out-of-place voice, echoing across the snow.

*

The man from the previous night stood at the edge of the field with a smile.

"You see, I've been requested to take care of these two myself. In fact, my fee is contingent upon it. So if you wouldn't mind handing them over…"

Orphelia merely glanced at him with disinterest. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gustave Malraux."

"Never heard of you," she replied curtly, when all of a sudden, an air-window opened up in front of her.

"*Hey, Orphelia! Where the hell are you? How many times have I told you not to leave the lab?*"

There was no picture, but the voice was unmistakable. It was the Le Wolfe Black Institute's student council president, Dirk Eberwein.

"…I won't be long," Orphelia answered, and the ominous feeling that surrounded them abated.

She turned to Gustave. "Suit yourself," she said with a sigh.

"I appreciate it," he said, tipping his hat with a graceful bow.

Orphelia remained silent, turning her back to Ayato as if nothing at all had happened. Just like that, she returned to the car, without looking back even once.

"Well, that was a close one… I've heard all about her, but it seems like she really is a monster. Thank heavens she's gone," Gustave murmured with a shrug, as if warding off a cloud of misfortune. He turned to Ayato. "Now then, back to business." He smiled, summoning a pair of magic squares at his sides. Just like the previous night, the magic squares filled with mana, a huge double-headed dog creeping out the one to his right, and a similarly-sized three-headed dog appearing out of the one to his left.

They were both smaller than the chimera he had summoned before, but the mana that comprised their bodies was considerably stronger.

"Allow me to introduce you to my little masterpieces, Orthrus and Cerberus. What do you think? Quite a spectacle, wouldn't you say? They're exactly as described in Greek myth. My dear guard dogs. They once made a real bloodbath of those valiant fools in Stjarnagarm… Well, they were no match for the commander, I'll give you that," Gustave added disappointedly, even as his smile didn't waver. "But I've improved upon them a lot since then. They should be more than enough to deal with wounded prey."

"Argh…!"

Taking a defensive posture, Ayato scanned his surroundings, looking for a way out of the situation. Even though Orphelia's miasma had abated, the injuries caused by its poison remained. He wouldn't be able to fight at his full strength—and moreover, he would stand no chance at all if he had to protect Julis, too.

The two creatures were circling around him, baring their razor-sharp teeth as they waited for an opening.

This is bad…

It looked like this was going to be more difficult than he had thought.

If there were only one, he might have been willing to risk it, but fighting both at once was beyond his current strength.

He, at least, had the Ser Veresta to help him, unlike the previous day, but he doubted that he would be able to wield it for long. He was already at his limit just maintaining the Orga Lux.

"Grrraaaaaar!"

The three-headed beast—Cerberus—gave out a long, low growl, arching its back. In that position, it was ready to attack at any moment, when seemingly out of nowhere, the other creature leaped toward his back.

It was a simple feint—but even though he could see that well enough, his body wouldn't respond in time.

"Gah…!"

The creature's foreleg swept down on him, sending him and Julis—still held tightly in his arms—slicing through the air.

The blow was so strong it almost knocked him unconscious, already weakened as he was by the effects of the poison.

The double-headed creature—Orthrus—leaped after him, running across the snow-covered field as if chasing a ball. As its huge jaws, easily large enough to swallow a person whole, drew closer, Ayato, timing his movements carefully, braced himself in a defensive position. Rather than trying to dodge its razor-sharp fangs, he stepped toward its gaping mouth.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, First Technique—*Goring Tusk!*"

He hunched his back, swinging the Ser Veresta downward with all his weight.

The two-headed creature let out a harrowing scream as the blade sliced it clean in half.

"Well now. I should have expected no less from the champion of the Phoenix. But I'm afraid you've just made a terrible mistake…"

Ayato turned to face the clapping, nodding Gustave, when he came face-to-face with the rapidly approaching Cerberus.

I can't dodge it!

He was about to thrust Julis away to protect her.

"—"

Then a blinding blade flashed in front of him, sending each of the creature's three fang-bared heads flying through the air.

Its huge body fell to the ground with a loud thud, sending a plume of snow dancing into the air.

In the middle of that cloud shone a figure with brilliant, golden hair.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayato. Looks like I made it just in time.”

“Claudia…!” Ayato gasped, relieved, before falling to the ground, his strength finally retreating.

She was holding a pair of swords, one in either hand—the Pan-Dora. Ayato felt as if the eye design on their hilts was staring right through him.

“Oh my, this is unexpected. What a nuisance.” Gustave, who until now hadn’t broken his smile, took on a look of mild impatience.

“What do you want to do, Gustave Malraux? I don’t mind fighting you…but you’d rather not, wouldn’t you?”

“…You’re a shrewd young lady, aren’t you? Disagreeably so.” He stood off against Claudia in silence for a long moment, before finally letting out a deep sigh, shaking his head. “Ha… You’re right. I was ordered not to lay a hand on you. I hate having to let this opportunity slip by, but it looks like I’ll have to withdraw for now.”

“That’s a wise decision.” Claudia smiled, watching as Gustave, his expression dark, disappeared into the forest.

“Ah… Thank you, Claudia,” Ayato murmured.

“I’m just glad I made it in time. I’ve already contacted the Royal Palace, so someone should be here soon to pick us up.”

“I see…,” he mumbled, his vision going dim. Everything seemed to fade into the distance.

“Ayato? Are you okay? Ayato…!”

Claudia’s voice accompanied him as he slipped into the darkness.

*

The greenhouse had long since ceased to be operational. The glass walls and roof were cracked and broken in places, and yet, there were signs of repairs as well, so it didn’t look as if it had been totally abandoned.

In this country, with its cold, severe winters, it was no doubt easy to find some use for a garden cut off from the outside elements. The plants that filled the building all glowed different shades of vibrant green, with pretty little flowers poking their heads

out here and there.

Inside, a rose-haired girl sat motionless, watching as a chestnut-haired girl moved to and fro, absorbed in her gardening. “I don’t get it. What’s so fun about it?” the former asked.

The latter girl shook her shoulders, chuckling. “It’s the feeling, I suppose.”

“The feeling?”

“Right. The feeling of touching life.”

“If that’s all, dealing with those kids should be enough.”

They were both young themselves, but there were many children in the orphanage younger still.

“It isn’t the same,” the chestnut-haired girl insisted. “These little ones can’t speak, but they’re incredibly honest. If you show them some love, they’ll love you right back. But if you ignore them, they’ll turn their backs on you.”

“Turn their backs? On people?” The girl with the reddish-pink hair made a face as if to say she didn’t understand.

“Oh, didn’t you know? When healthy plants die, it’s because no one has loved them.”

“…I didn’t know that.” Her tone indicated she was unconvinced, though she showed no sign of wanting to leave.

She couldn’t pinpoint exactly why, but being inside the greenhouse was strangely comforting. It might have been old, cramped, and run-down, but she found herself able to relax there.

And after a while, she suddenly realized it was thanks to the presence of the kind girl working in front of her.

“Doesn’t it get boring, just watching all the time? Why don’t you try helping out?”

“…Me?”

“There no one else here. Here, take this.”

The rose-haired girl turned embarrassed. “I-I’ve never taken care of plants before…”

“Oh my… You really don’t know. Okay, I’ll teach you.” The other girl laughed.

It was a truly delighted smile: gentle, happy—and warm.

*

His body was awfully heavy.

An unbearable feeling of pressure, as if something unseen were

crushing him.

Ayato opened his eyes, unable to endure it any longer, and the ceiling of a dim room appeared before him.

He lay bewildered for a short moment, before it all came rushing back.

He was in the room that had been assigned to him in the detached villa on the grounds of the Lieseltanian Royal Palace.

"…So I lost consciousness…"

Which meant that the weight pressing down on him was probably due to the effects of Orphelia's poison.

When he tried to raise his body, the weight abruptly revealed its true form:

"Ngh…"

"Zzz…"

Saya and Kirin lay asleep, sprawled on top of him like a blanket.

As one would expect for a room designated for royal guests, the bed should have been more than large enough for three people to sleep in comfortably. But the two were holding on to him tightly, Saya's face against his arm, and Kirin's by his feet. Both were sound asleep, their breathing soft and relaxed.

"Um…"

Unable to fully grasp the situation, he lay wondering what he should do, when the door quietly swung open, and a lone figure stepped in.

"So you're awake. Honestly, Ayato, don't scare us all like that." Her face was silhouetted by the light from the corridor, but he could tell from the voice that it was Julis.

"Ha… This is embarrassing… But are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I woke up a long time ago," she replied, sitting down on a chair by the bed. "How long do you think you've been asleep?"

"Huh? I don't know…" He had been in no state to keep count, after all.

Julis flashed a mischievous smile. "Three days."

"Three days?!" he exclaimed.

"Orphelia uses all different types of poisons. The one that she used on you puts its victims into the same state as when they use up all their prana. It isn't life-threatening, but the stronger your prana to begin with, the stronger its effect. So it looks like it took quite a toll on you."

“Oh…”

“These two were so worried, they’ve been watching over you every day. You should thank them when they wake up,” Julis said, her gentle eyes looking over Saya and Kirin. “And *I* still have to thank you, too.”

“Me?”

“Claudia told me what happened. How you held Orphelia off, and then when Gustave showed up… Thank you.”

“Oh, that.” What she said was true, but he hadn’t thought much of it. If their positions had been reversed, she would have clearly done the same thing. They had already developed that level of trust.

“Don’t mention it. Just as long as you don’t start talking about debts and all that again.”

Julis gave him a mild smile, shaking her head. “No… I just wanted to say it properly.”

Ayato smiled back before taking a serious expression. “So do you think you can tell me now? About you and her—Orphelia Landlufen.”

“…Right. I guess you have a right to know, since it’s come to this.” The princess fell silent for a moment, her expression heavy with emotion. Eventually, Julis took out a handkerchief from her breast pocket. “Do you remember this?”

“Of course. We first met thanks to that handkerchief.”

It had been carried away by the wind, dancing in the air right in front of him that day when he had first arrived at Seidoukan Academy. He had gone to return it to its owner—that had been their first meeting.

It felt like an eternity had passed since then, but it had only been half a year.

“Right. I think I mentioned it once before, but it was a present to me from everyone at the orphanage.”

“Yeah, everyone embroidered it for you. And your best friend sewed something in the middle of it…” He stopped there, suddenly realizing who it was. “Don’t tell me…!”

“Yes. My best friend was Orphelia,” Julis admitted wistfully, tracing the embroidery with her finger.

“So she used to be at that orphanage?”

Julis nodded slightly, standing up. She approached the window and pulled open the luxurious curtains.

He didn’t know what time it was, but soft moonlight shone in

through the cloudy sky.

"But if she's your best friend, why did she…?" Recalling the battle between the two, he averted his gaze.

Friends anywhere quarreled every now and then, but that battle was something else.

"When I first started coming to the orphanage, Orphelia and I soon became good friends. We were around the same age, and even though our personalities were completely different, we got along with each other. She was so kind, she couldn't even hurt an insect, and she loved to take care of plants… She would be so happy when one of those small flowers started to bloom…"

The Orphelia who Julis described sounded like a completely different person than the one Ayato had seen.

"But then, one day, she just disappeared. When I asked the sisters where she had gone, they wouldn't tell me anything. So I begged my brother to investigate, and he finally looked into it for me. It turned out that the orphanage's management had racked up a huge debt, and…well, they'd given Orphelia to a research institution as collateral… The stupidest part of it all was that I didn't know anything up till then. About the way this county is run, this system, or even my own position within it all."

"…"

"Of course, I did everything in my power to try to get her back. But all it did was show me just how powerless I was. Ultimately, no one in this country is allowed to have an opinion on the integrated enterprise foundations' research facilities," Julis finished.

The room fell into silence.

Ayato too kept silent, enduring that heavy stillness.

"The research institute that she was sent to was operated by Frauenlob. It was that abandoned building in the middle of the snowfield."

"That was it…?"

"They were trying to research…how to create a Genestella."

"Wha—?!" Ayato exclaimed in surprise. He had never heard of such an insane idea.

"The person in charge of it all was a someone called the Great Scholar, Magnum Opus. She was a student from Allekant."

"So that's why you hate Allekant…"

"You might call it a personal grudge," she muttered, slowly taking out her mobile and opening an air-window.

It was a photo of two young, innocent girls. One was a spirited-looking child with brilliantly rose-colored hair, the other chestnut-haired with a gentle demeanor.

"This is me and Orphelia."

He recognized Julis straightaway. But with the color of her hair and eyes, and the aura around her, Orphelia looked like a completely different person.

"Orphelia wasn't a Genestella back then, let alone a Strega. To think that they've turned her into the strongest in the world…"

In other words, she was an artificially created Strega.

"So you're saying the research was a success?"

"Well… If it was, it would have been the discovery of the century. They would have made a huge deal of it. That they didn't means there must have been a problem. Like Orphelia."

"A problem?"

She gave him a dark smile, her shoulders trembling slightly. "You saw what was left of that building. That's what happened when her powers got out of control. The whole place fell into ruin. The ground itself rotted. Not even grass will grow there anymore."

"Got out of control…? What do you mean?"

"I don't know the details. All I know is that when the research institute was destroyed, Solnage's special operations unit rescued her. After that, she was transferred from Frauenlob to Solnage, but I don't know what kind of deal they made."

"So that's why she's at Le Wolfe…"

Solnage was the integrated enterprise foundation backing the Le Wolfe Black Institute.

"I only found out about all this much later, of course. At the time, what happened to that research facility was kept secret, and I couldn't find any clue as to where she was or how she was doing… Until I watched the Lindvolus…"

"The one before last?" Ayato asked.

Julis nodded. "I couldn't believe my eyes. Her appearance had changed, but I knew it was her. So I tried to contact her…" Her voice trailed off.

Ayato could guess what the result had been.

"She'd changed. Maybe it was unavoidable, given the circumstances, but she seemed to have given up on everything, to have thrown everything away. But…I still want the old Orphelia back. At this rate, she won't last." She clenched her teeth.

“What do you mean, she won’t last?”

“I’m a Strega, too, so I know. It isn’t possible to fully control that much power. That miasma is a double-edged sword. The more she uses it, the more it eats away at her own life…”

Ayato himself had found it hard to believe that someone could wield that much power without suffering any consequences.

“Which is why, around a year ago, when I was admitted to Asterisk, I went looking for her. I thought I’d be able to persuade her. Or at least be able to stop her from getting into any more useless battles. But she wouldn’t listen to me. She told me I’d have to win against her… But you can probably guess how that worked out.”

So that was what happened.

“Sorry it took so long, but that’s it.” Julis let out a sigh, wearing a relieved expression. She rested a hand on her hip. “So, Ayato, this is between me and Orphelia. I’m sorry you got caught up in it, but I need to settle this myself. Otherwise, Orphelia will never accept the outcome. Okay?”

“…I understand.” He wanted to offer his help, but there were some things that had to be seen to alone.

“So that’s that. You two can stop pretending to be asleep now,” she added teasingly. “And the same thing goes for you—don’t get involved.”

“…So you noticed us?”

“A-ah… Sorry.”

Saya and Kirin looked up apologetically.

“Oh, so you were awake,” Ayato asked, though he immediately realized how obvious that was.

“Um, we didn’t mean to eavesdrop… We just kind of ended up overhearing, I guess…”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s more important right now for us to focus on what to do about Gustave Malraux,” Julis said.

“Don’t tell me, has anyone else been attacked while I was asleep?” This was no time to be taking it easy, after all.

“No, everything’s fine on that point, at least. Both the Royal Palace and the villa are on heightened security, and the whole city is on alert. Even *he* won’t be able try anything here without considerable planning. And I had some security posted at the orphanage, too, just in case.”

She was evidently worried, given what had happened to Flora.

“Even the integrated enterprise foundations won’t just sit back if he tries anything too stupid. My brother should have already contacted them, but there’s always a fixed number of soldiers stationed at their research facilities near the capital. So long as we don’t get caught up in a full-scale war, they should be more than enough to deal with one criminal.”

“It would be better if he would behave himself and leave us alone though…,” Kirin murmured, her fingers grazing her Senbakiri.

“…That’s probably hoping for too much.”

“Right. It will be too hard for him to carry out his mission—attacking us—once we go back to Asterisk. Not only will he have a hard time getting into the city in the first place, it will be all but impossible for him to get out, even if he does beat us. So he’s sure to try something before then.”

“In that case, he’s most likely going to try again on the road back to the airport…”

An attack on that mountain road could turn into a real problem.

Ayato startled. “Where’s Claudia?” he asked, suddenly remembering something he had to ask her.

His memories were hazy, but he remembered what she had said to Gustave. It seemed likely that she knew more about what was going on than she had told them.

“Oh, she went home.”

“Wha—?”

“She said something came up, and she had to drop by somewhere. She seemed to be in a bit of a hurry, though.”

“Is that so…?” It looked like she hadn’t mentioned her conversation with Gustave to the others.

I’ll try to call her later…

It was Claudia, after all, so she must have had some sort of plan, but he wanted to hear what it was first.

But it was then that, all of a sudden, his stomach let out a loud growl.

“Ah…”

It was understandable that he would be hungry, given how long he had been asleep, but it still left him slightly embarrassed.

Saya, Kirin, and Julis all glanced at one another, bursting into laughter.

“Well, it’s a good thing you’ve still got your appetite. I’ll ask the

kitchen to prepare something for you. Just hold on a moment, okay?" Julis chuckled, wiping away the tears at the corners of her eyes. She stood up to leave, when—

"P-p-p-princess! Terrible news!"

—Flora burst into the room in a panic.

CHAPTER 6
SUBDUING DRAGONS

"What is it, Flora? Didn't you go back to the orphanage?"

Julis frowned, bending down to meet the young maid's gaze in an attempt to calm her down.

"Y-yes! At least, I meant to, but there's something horrible happening in the city!"

"Something horrible?"

"Um, I mean, there's all these huge lizard things flying through the air!" she exclaimed frantically, spreading her arms as wide as they would go to emphasize their size. "I was so scared, I came right back!"

There was no way of telling exactly how large they were, but she must have meant they were around the size of an adult person.

"Everyone's in a panic, and all the traffic has stopped!"

"They aren't attacking anyone, are they?"

"N-no, I don't think so…"

Julis sighed in relief. "All right, Flora. Stay in the villa. You'll be safe here," she said reassuringly, before turning to the others. "My brother must know what's going on. I need to talk to him. I might have to go outside before coming back, though, depending on the situation…"

"In that case, I'm going with you. I need to get changed, though. Can you wait a minute?" Ayato got out of the bed, stretching his body. His prana seemed to have returned to normal, and he didn't feel any pain or discomfort.

"Ah!" Flora gasped. "I'll go get you a change of clothes!"

"But, Ayato, you're still—"

“I’m fine. More importantly, it sounds like this is Gustave’s doing, so you can’t say that it doesn’t concern us all. But what will you do, Saya, Kirin?” Ayato asked as he put on his shirt.

“I’m going, too.”

“Me too.”

The two nodded immediately.

Julis flashed everyone a strained smile. “All right. Let’s get ready, then.”

But they didn’t need any encouragement, and the four soon set off for the Royal Palace.

As they were entering Jolbert’s room, they exchanged glances with several tense officials who were hurrying off in the other direction. One, an elderly man wearing a difficult-to-read expression, took notice of Julis, but nonetheless rushed off with the others.

“Ah, it’s you,” Jolbert said. Perhaps he had been woken from a nap by the previous group, as he looked tired. “I guess you came to ask about what’s going on in the city, right? Well, you picked a good moment. I just got a report on the situation.”

“What’s going on?” Julis demanded.

“It looks like a bunch of powerful creatures, each about a meter long, popped up out of nowhere in the city center. We don’t know how many there are in total yet, but there seems to be at least a dozen. Winged lizards—well, dragons, I suppose,” Jolbert answered, holding back a yawn. “We’ve contacted Solnage and Frauenlob, but they’re taking their time to respond. Honestly, I doubt they want to send in troops. Thankfully, these dragons don’t seem to be attacking anyone at the moment, so the police force is managing to maintain order. Maybe our friends in the integrated enterprise foundations have decided that they’re not much of a threat…,” he grumbled. “But we can’t just ignore the situation. Given how many there are, the police force has mobilized everyone they can to try to respond to it. So that’s what’s going on.”

“…Everyone?” Julis raised an eyebrow. “Even the people assigned to be preparing for an attack by Gustave Malraux?”

“Of course. I mean, he’s the one responsible for this, isn’t he? They were deployed precisely for this kind of situation, so it’s only natural, right? Ah, I did ask them to leave the security here and at the other important areas alone, of course, so you don’t need to worry—”

“I see.” Julis clicked her tongue in annoyance, without even waiting for her brother to finish. “You do realize that this is a diversion, right?”

“A diversion? But in that case, there would be easier ways about it…”

The situation didn’t seem so urgent that the students would have to deal with it themselves, but Julis, her eyelids clenched shut, shook her head. “It may be a diversion, but it isn’t to lure us out. It’s supposed to draw the others away. They’re decoys. If everyone falls for it and heads for the city center, everywhere else is inevitably going to be shorthanded.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Saya said doubtfully. “Jolbert just said that he’d had the security at all the important areas left alone…” She fell silent, her eyes opening wide. “Oh no.”

“Right,” Julis spat in disgust. “The important areas. Tell me, brother, was that what those people before us came to talk with you about?”

“…Ha, you’ve got me there.” Jolbert shrugged, looking up at the ceiling. “That’s very perceptive of you, little sister. Like I just said, we’re shorthanded at the moment. So they wanted to pull the police back from wherever possible to focus on the situation at hand. Naturally, the poorer areas were at the top of that list. They didn’t want to expend resources there to begin with.”

“…And did you approve this plan?”

“What else could I do? It isn’t like they don’t have a point. Things haven’t gotten too bad yet, but what will we do if these dragons start attacking people? If we don’t deal with them right away, it could explode in all our faces.”

“But that’s—”

“Julis. I like Flora, too, you know, and I want to do what I can to help this orphanage you’re so fond of. But even so, I can’t change my priorities. After all, you’re what’s most important to me.” Jolbert met his sister’s gaze, his voice low, as if admonishing her. “Won’t you listen to me for once, and stay here where it’s safe?”

“…No!” Julis declared bluntly, storming out of the room.

Ayato and the others rushed after her, catching up as she slammed her fist against the wall of the corridor.

Her face was red with anger, mana buzzing uncontrollably around her.

“Julis, calm down,” Ayato urged.

"…I'm fine," she muttered, taking a deep breath. She brushed the hair out of her face with her hand, before turning to the others. "Gustave must have known that we would recognize this for what it is. He'll be waiting for us in the shantytown. But I still have to go. The sisters are at the orphanage. They aren't safe… But just so you know, you don't have to come with me."

"What are you saying?" Ayato responded with a grin.

"…This concerns us all." Saya nodded.

"That's right. You're not the only one he's after," Kirin added.

Julis brightened at her friend's words, her face turning serious. "In that case, I have a plan. But I need you all to do as I say."

*

The night wind over the lake was especially cold. All the more so when flying as fast as they were against it.

"So this is that shortcut you mentioned… It *is* fast, huh…," Ayato murmured.

He was flying just inches above the surface of the lake, thanks to numerous pairs of fiery wings that Julis had made sprout from his back.

"Th-this is just one of them. I was using a different way, up until I was able to master this technique. Anyway, given the situation, this has to be the fastest way to get there…," Julis, held tight in Ayato's arms, whispered softly.

"Julis? What is it?"

"N-nothing! I—I mean, your face is too close!" She blushed, trying to push him away.

"S-sorry…"

"…W-well, anyway, we can cross the lake in less than five minutes this way. Let's just focus on that for now."

The moon swayed gently, reflected on the water's faint ripples.

To the east, the lights from Strell shone brilliantly over the lake.

There were very few lights shining in the shantytown on the opposite side, the direction they were headed.

"There it is." Julis pointed, the silhouette of the tall church on the grounds of the orphanage rising up in the darkness.

"…Huh?"

In front of the orphanage, standing atop an ugly concrete dike at the edge of the lake, a shadow of a man stood waiting.

“Well now, what do we have here? You came faster than I was expecting.”

“Gustave Malraux…!” Julis muttered, gritting her teeth.

“But I *did* know you would come, of course.”

“You’d better not have laid a finger on anyone at the orphanage.” Julis shot him a piercing glare.

Gustave laughed softly. “Don’t worry. To be honest with you, I can’t say that the thought hadn’t occurred to me, but it looks like there’s a rather formidable sister living among them all. I don’t have time to deal with her.”

“Hmph… Good,” Julis muttered as she and Ayato reached the ground.

They had landed around five meters from Gustave. Just a step closer, and he would be within Ayato’s range.

“They’re no concern of mine. I only needed to lure you all out. And my little Colchian dragons that I sent to play in the city are harmless, so long as they’re not attacked. After all, I wouldn’t want to hurt anyone at the integrated enterprise foundations, now would I?”

“…You’re very talkative, Gustave Malraux. Why don’t you tell us who sent you on this stupid errand?” Julis growled, mana swirling around her.

Ayato pulled out the Ser Veresta, crouching down.

“My, my, I am a pro, you realize. Do give me some credit. But instead—” He stopped short, seeming to be completely unfazed, spreading his arms wide in an elaborate gesture.

At that moment, a huge magic square appeared beneath the lake’s surface. Ayato couldn’t tell exactly how large it was, but it must have been at least thirty meters across.

“Allow me to introduce you to my greatest masterpiece.”

The square emitted a sudden flash of light, and a swarm of tentacle-like snake heads burst out of the water—nine in total.

“Wha—?!”

Ayato and Julis stood in mute shock at the size of the figure rising slowly out of the lake.

It was no exaggeration to say that it was as large as a small hill, the monster’s nine snake heads growing out of a body that resembled a four-legged dinosaur. It was still half-submerged beneath the water, but its body alone was over twenty meters across, so its total length, from head to tail, could easily have been

more than forty.

It slightly resembled the dragon-like creature Ayato and Kirin had encountered in Asterisk's ballast area several months prior, but there was no comparison as far as size was concerned. The creature rising in front of them now was easily twice as large, at least.

Its many pairs of eyes burned crimson, its mouths, each lined with razor-sharp teeth, were wide enough to swallow a car whole, let alone a person.

"A Hydra?!" came Julis's stifled voice.

"Indeed, Your Highness, indeed." Gustave nodded gleefully. "It's just like in the ancient myths—no, even grander, wouldn't you say? It's the ultimate magical beast. It took me a full three years to create."

At that, the nine heads each reared high into the air, bellowing a terrible roar that left the air itself quaking around them.

People must have begun to discover the monster rising out of the lake, as the shantytown, until now silent under the deathlike gloom of night, erupted into a great commotion, screams and roars of terror beginning to echo out from every direction.

"Are you sure you want to do this?! If you set something like this loose, the army will have to step in!"

In fact, given its size, they were probably already deploying.

"I wonder?" Gustave laughed, his composure unshaking. "Thanks to that little incident in the Royal Palace the other day, Solnage and Frauenlob ought to have already understood that this was my doing. And of course, they'll know why I'm here."

"—!"

Gustave cleared his throat, as if to hold back more laughter. "I'm sure it'll be a nuisance for them, too, if you were to participate in the Gryps. Of course, they'll have no choice but to respond if my Hydra was to attack the city… But a place like this? An abandoned little ghetto for abandoned people? I think you'll find the integrated enterprise foundations rather slow to respond."

"…" Julis stood silent, biting her lip.

That alone confirmed that Gustave was speaking was the truth.

"Be that as it may, who knows what will happen if we take too long here? So let's get this over with, shall we?" he said.

The Hydra opened one of its nine mouths, a huge amount of mana building up inside its gaping maw.

That's…!

“Ayato! Look out!” Julis cried in warning as he jumped aside.

Barely a second later, a deafening burst of light shot out of the Hydra’s mouth, blowing away a swath of concrete as it gouged through the dike.

“…That kind of power… It’s like one of Saya’s Luxes…,” Ayato murmured. If he had been hit by it, he wouldn’t have been able to escape unscathed even if he *had* used his prana to defend himself.

“Well then, it’s time I excused myself. Have fun,” Gustave said, disappearing into the darkness behind him.

“Argh!”

Julis moved to chase after him, when the Hydra let out an ear-splitting roar as it released another burst of light directly in her path.

“Julis, watch out!” Ayato cried, grabbing her in his arms and dodging the blast just in time.

“Th-thanks…,” she whispered.

“Forget about Gustave for now. We have to do something about this thing first.”

He glanced up at the creature, still approaching them. Now that it had climbed out of the lake, it towered over them like a skyscraper.

It took one lumbering step after another, the earth trembling as it made its way through the shantytown, smashing through first one crude shelter, then the next.

And directly in its path was the orphanage.

If that was what it was heading for, it must have known that Julis would never abandon it.

“Damn him! So he’s saying that if I want to protect them, I’m going to have to fight this thing?” Julis cursed, her temper rising dangerously.

“Julis! Make sure all the residents get out of here!”

“What?! Don’t tell me you’re planning to stop that thing by yourself?”

“Don’t worry about that! I’ll think of something! And it looks like Saya’s almost ready.”

“But…,” she hesitated, looking unconvinced.

“I don’t know this area very well, and besides, the people here will listen to you.”

“…All right,” she relented. “But don’t do anything stupid.” Wings of flame sprouted from her back as she took off.

After watching her disappear out of his line of sight, Ayato climbed to the roof of a nearby building to survey the situation. The Hydra was moving directly toward the orphanage, paying no heed at all to the buildings in its way, carving an open route through the townscape. It was rather slow on its feet, though, so he would probably have enough time to stop it before it got there.

Running along the tops of the buildings alongside that gash, he caught up to it in no time at all.

"Right, now what…?"

He kept his distance from the Hydra, keeping pace with its movements as he looked for an opening—but it looked like dealing with it would be more difficult than he had anticipated. It was indeed quite slow compared to the other creatures that Gustave had summoned, but its nine heads seemed able to lash out in every direction, without leaving so much as a single blind spot. If he didn't plan his attack carefully, it would be sure to counter any move he made.

Against such a gargantuan opponent, he would have no choice but to use buildings' roofs as footholds to launch his jump attacks. He wouldn't be able to change his trajectory once he was in the air, though, so it would be difficult to evade any counterattacks. Even entering the state of *shiki* wouldn't help him there.

"I guess I'll have to take it down piece by piece," he muttered, catching his breath, before leaping into the creature's reach.

"Guooooooooooo!"

The Hydra came to a stop, three of its heads releasing blinding bursts of light toward him with a terrible roar.

Ayato twisted through the air, dodging them all by only a hair's breadth, as he swung the Ser Veresta.

"Giiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

A deafening wail tore through the night sky as the blade sliced clean through the closest head.

"Yes!"

The Hydra let loose additional bursts of light toward the ground directly in front of him, but Ayato had already taken that into account, rebounding off a nearby wall in midair when—

"Huh?"

Something completely beyond his expectations occurred.

The gaping hole at the creature's neck where he had chopped off the first of its heads began to seethe, swelling and burbling as it

started to retake its prior shape.

"It's *this* accurate?"

If his memory served him right, the Hydra from Greek mythology could, from all but its main neck, regrow two heads where one had been dismembered. And it was no simple regeneration—rather, the monster grew stronger the more damage it sustained—but according to the myths, at least, the regrowth could be stopped by burning the wound. In that case, the Ser Veresta should have been enough to stop it, but—

"I guess I don't have a choice…"

Now that it had come to this, he would have to change his tactics.

"If I go for the central head, the others will just try to protect it. I'll have to take care of them first."

Fortunately, the regeneration didn't seem to be instantaneous, so he would have time to make another attack.

He returned to the rooftop, estimating his distance from the monster and preparing his footing to launch another strike with the Ser Veresta. If his timing was off even by a fraction of a second, he could end up getting blown away by one of its beams of light, or even swallowed whole by one of those vicious heads.

"Okay…," he said to himself, channeling prana through every corner of his body, and shuffling across the rooftop to close the distance.

At that moment, his senses, magnified through the state of *shiki*, detected something moving at the edge of the area where he was about to attack. He spun around to see a young woman hiding behind a pile of debris. She was probably paralyzed with terror, unable to bring herself to move.

And to make matters worse, the pile of wreckage she was hiding behind looked like it might collapse at any moment.

This is bad!

As if by reflex, he leaped down, kicking away the debris to protect her.

The woman stared at him wide-eyed in surprise, but he didn't have time to say anything. He could already feel the Hydra's murderous gaze being directed at him.

He tried to move out of the way to draw the monster's attention away from the woman, but one of its heads, one step ahead, began to lash out at him from the corner of his vision.

“Tch…!”

He began to retake his fighting stance with the Ser Veresta, but he knew he would be too late.

The huge jaw opened wide, its sword-like fangs directed straight at him, its bloodred tongue flittering ravenously, when—

“Grrraaagiiiiiiiiiii!”

—there was a terrible shriek, and the head fell to the ground, writhing around in circles.

At that moment, his mobile began to ring.

He opened an air-window at once, and Saya’s impassive face, covered by a heads-up display for her weapon’s aiming device, popped up before him.

“*…Looks like I was just in time.*”

“Saya! You saved me!”

“*My preparations are complete. Is that snake-like thing the target?*”

“Yeah, we’ve got another monster to get rid of. Can you cover me?”

Saya was on the far shore of the lake, near the Royal Palace. She had just hit it with a long-range sniping shot. She was easily more than three kilometers away, but that was Saya, all right. There was no denying her skill.

“*Understood. I want to be sure of the situation, so keep the air-window open.*”

“Got it.” He nodded.

He pointed the woman toward safety. He probably should have accompanied her, but he didn’t have time.

“Saya, I don’t think we can stop this thing unless we cut off the main head. So can you—?”

“*I’ll take care of the others.*”

“Right. They’ll regenerate before long, though, so keep an eye on it.”

“*Understood. Is there anything else?*”

“That’s all, I think.”

“*Okay. In that case… Now.*”

At Saya’s signal, Ayato leaped toward the hydra.

The nine heads swung to meet his attack, preparing to launch beams of light in his direction.

But just before the first head could release a counterattack, it exploded right in front of him.

The nine heads were perfectly coordinated, without leaving so

much as an inch of an opening—but on the other hand, once one was taken out, it left a gaping hole in the creature's defenses. Saya's attack might not have been enough to completely incapacitate that head, but it was enough to give him just such a window.

He twisted around the bursts of light that the remaining heads continued to launch at him, bringing the Ser Veresta down as hard as he could, slicing through first one head, then the next.

"That makes two!"

He jumped from rooftop to rooftop, preparing to launch another, more reckless attack. He couldn't afford to give it time to regenerate. It would leave him open to attack, but—

"…*Behind you, diagonally, to your right.*"

"Got it!"

Saya was covering those openings perfectly.

Without him saying anything, and with perfect timing, she took care of the head that he was lining up to attack. Even if he did try to tell her, she would no doubt already know, intuitively, which head he was planning to aim for next.

"That's four!" he cried out as he sheared off another two.

There was a soft chuckle from the other side of the air-window. "*It's been a while since I've been able to back you up*," Saya said.

"Ha-ha. It has, hasn't it?" Ayato laughed as he continued to dodge the monster's unending attacks.

He had fought alongside Julis all throughout the Phoenix, and he'd had to fight alongside Kirin, too, on occasion, but he must have still been a child the last time he and Saya had fought together.

"Amazing, Ayato. You move as if you're reading my mind."

"That goes for you, too!" he answered, launching another slice with the Ser Veresta. "Six down!" Only three more to go.

However, the first two heads were almost completely regenerated. He would have to hurry.

"Saya, let's finish it now!"

"…*Understood.*"

He tried to calm his breathing, pouring his prana into the Ser Veresta.

The black pattern that wrapped around the sword began to swell, the blade of pure, searing white growing longer than Ayato's height.

It was Meteor Arts.

The Orga Lux wasn't particularly flexible in this state, nor fast

for that matter, but with only three heads left he should be able to handle it, he thought.

He leaped through the air, mowing down two of the three remaining heads with a downward stroke of the Ser Veresta.

The central head had managed to dodge the attack, but he had prepared for that possibility.

As it prepared to attack the defenseless Ayato, a ball of light building up in its gaping maw, Saya landed another long-distance strike.

Now I just need to line up my attack, and then—

But before he could finish his thought, a chill ran down his back.

The first head that Saya had blasted away had already regenerated, its huge jaw opening directly above him.

"Wha—?!"

He should have still had a little time, given its rate of regrowth.

Only then did he realize it.

The other heads had stopped regenerating.

So it put all its energy into just the one?!

He wouldn't be able to avoid it now.

"If that's how it is…!" he cried out, tightening his grip on the Ser Veresta and leaving himself open in an all-or-nothing attack. At best, he would only be able to deliver the blow while receiving one himself, but there was no going back now.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Grrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrr!"

He swung the Ser Veresta in a wide arc, cutting through both its blast of light directed at him and the creature's regenerated head—but probably because he hadn't lined himself up properly, his attack swung wide of the central head.

By meeting that burst of light head-on with the Ser Veresta, he had succeeded in reducing its power somewhat, but it was still strong enough to throw him across the street, sending him crashing against a partially collapsed building.

"Agh…!" He gasped in pain as his bones creaked from the impact, but he could still move.

"*Ayato!*" Saya cried out.

"D-don't worry about me…!" he answered, raising his hand. "We have to take care of it before it regenerates!" He adjusted his grip on the Ser Veresta, when—

“No! You’ve done enough, you two. I’ll take it from here!” Julis’s voice boomed down from above.

Ayato looked up to see her floating in the air, her fiery wings beating fiercely, both arms raised high.

“Blossom—*Rafflesia Duo Flos!*”

With that, a huge multi-layered magic square appeared below the Hydra’s feet, erupting in a massive explosion that enveloped it whole.

“

head without so much as a sound.

"…It's over," he murmured, his eyes closed, as the Hydra's bones melted away into the wind.

*

"Good grief. This is turning into a bigger hassle than I thought." Gustave sighed from the vantage point where he had been watching the battle.

He put his retractable telescope into his pocket and smoothed down his mustache.

He had expected the Hydra to make short work of them, but in his line of work, things didn't always go according to plan.

"I guess I'll have to look for another opportunity…," he muttered, but before he could leave, he noticed someone standing behind him in the shadows. "Now this is a surprise," he called out. "How did you find me?"

"You're not the kind of person to get involved in a fight directly. But you have to confirm the outcome, after all, due to the nature of your work. So even if you don't take part in a battle yourself, you wouldn't be far away from it. That's what Julis thought." Kirin Toudou stepped out of the shadows, the moonlight illuminating her face. "There aren't a lot of places around here where someone might get a full view of the town. All I had to do was check them out."

"Process of elimination? I see, I see." Gustave nodded, beginning to channel his prana.

Kirin, noticing that, put her hand on her katana. "There's no need to keep fighting. Surrender. To be perfectly honest, you've already exhausted yourself. You don't have any hope of defeating me."

"Hmm… You're right about that."

Summoning the Hydra had used up most of his prana, and he had already exhausted more than he should have when summoning the Colchian dragons to use as decoys. He didn't have much left.

"Be that as it may, I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. Do you know what these are?" he asked as he pulled a small sachet out of his pocket, poured the contents into his cupped hand, and threw them onto the ground in front of him.

"…Fangs from some kind of animal…?" Kirin answered

uncertainly. It was hard to see them properly against the white snow.

"Exactly. Dragon's teeth, to be precise."

"Dragon's teeth?"

"Indeed. You've heard the story about Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, I assume? How he planted those dragon's teeth, from which a band of ferocious warriors, the Spartoi, emerged?"

"—!" Kirin looked back at him.

Gustave broke out into a grin as magic squares spread open, one after another, on the ground where he had thrown the teeth, and then six skeletal soldiers, armed with swords and shields, began to emerge.

"I might have had to use prana to make the teeth, but they can be stored indefinitely, and used later without expending any prana at all, you see. They might not be particularly strong given the limitations, but if I understand correctly…" He had been backing away from her little by little, when he paused for a second, meeting her gaze. "The Toudou style focuses on one-to-one combat. Even if my friends here can't stop you, they should at least buy me enough time to escape."

Blue flames flickered in the Spartoi skulls' eye sockets as the warriors slowly encircled her, their bones making a dry, rasping sound.

Kirin let out a slow, deep sigh, shaking her head. "You're right —the Toudou style doesn't have as many techniques for group combat as, say, the Amagiri Shinmei style. Certainly not the kind suitable for actual combat," she said, unsheathing her Japanese sword. "For me personally, though, it's a different matter."

"What…?" Gustave frowned.

"In my daily training, especially since I met Ayato, I've come to understand the necessity of diversity in one's fighting techniques," she said, gripping the sword in her right hand, and the scabbard in her left, adopting a fighting position.

"A dual-sword style…?" Gustave whispered in disbelief, taking a step back. There was an aura around the girl, not even half his age, that he had never seen before, and a shiver of uncertainty ran down his back. "N-now!" he stammered, ordering the skeletal soldiers to attack.

The Spartoi spread out to surround her—

And shattered where they stood, falling to the ground.

“I-impossible…!”

She had moved so fast that he had hardly seen it, but she had spun around to face the two Spartoi about to lunge at her from behind, her sword extended at an angle to deflect their attacks. She held its sheath in her other hand, smashing through the creatures to her sides as she swung around, before delivering the finishing blow to the pair that had first tried to sneak up on her.

Gustave, petrified with shock, quickly came to his senses and started running toward the forest.

But Kirin was faster, leaping ahead of him and driving her sword down without mercy.

He let out a dull cry, his eyes rolling back in his head as he crumpled into the snow.

“Don’t worry,” Kirin murmured as she sheathed her sword. “I hit you with the blunt side.”

CHAPTER 7
REUNION

Ayato, Julis, and Saya joined up with Kirin before handing Gustave over to the police.

He was quickly dosed with a drug to restrain his prana. As long as he couldn't concentrate his prana, he wouldn't be able to use his abilities to try to escape. However, its effects weren't long-lasting, so he would have to be sent to a facility designed for detaining Genestella long-term, somewhere equipped with an isolation space that negated the effects of mana.

By the time the students had fully explained the situation and arrived back at the Royal Palace, dawn was beginning to break.

They found Jolbert sitting on the grand staircase, chin in hand, appearing troubled. Maria, leaning against him, was breathing peacefully, sound asleep.

They seemed to have been waiting there all night.

"Well now, it looks like you've been busy. I'm just glad to see you're all safe and sound."

"…Mm?" Maria snapped awake at the sound of her husband's voice, and rubbed her sleepy eyes.

Jolbert glanced at her with a gentle expression before turning back to the students with a shrug. "But you know…this will only end up making you even more popular."

"Is that a bad thing?" Julis asked, stepping forward grimly.

"Well, I'll end up losing my position at this rate, won't I?"

"I see…" Julis let out a deep sigh, before looking her brother in the eyes. "In that case, brother, let me ask you something."

"Hmm? What?"

“Won’t you help me?”

At this question, Jolbert’s eyes opened wide. It was quite rare for the king, who was normally remarkably noncommittal, to exhibit such unfeigned surprise. “Julis… What are you saying?” he asked nervously.

But her gaze was unwavering. “Everything that’s happened lately has just made me even more sure of it. Things can’t keep going the way they are. I might have been able to save the orphanage, but that was just treating one of the symptoms of the problem. To change this country, we’re going to have to address the root cause.”

“That sounds good in theory, but what exactly do you mean?”

“…I’m going to win the Gryps, and expand the power of the monarchy.”

Jolbert stiffened. “H-hold on a minute, Julis! Are you… You *are* being serious, aren’t you?”

“Of course. Even if we were to try to follow the appropriate procedures through the parliament, the ministers will just do whatever the integrated enterprise foundations tell them to do. So I’ll just have to use whatever others means are available to our advantage,” Julis declared with a self-deprecating laugh.

“…It’s certainly possible, if you asked for it as a reward from the Festa, and it isn’t like it would be without precedent…,” Jolbert muttered in astonishment.

Lieseltania might be an extreme case, but it was a well-known fact that practically every other nation in the world was also under the control of the integrated enterprise foundations. In any of them, the governmental powers were only as broad as the written law, and laws could easily be revised whenever the integrated enterprise foundations wanted.

But it was another thing entirely for them to be changed by an individual with no official ties.

“I understand that it’s a tall order. Maybe it’s not even the right way to go about it. But it’s what I’m wishing for… And that’s what that city exists for, after all, isn’t it?” She paused there for a moment, squeezing her eyes tight as if to shut out any trace of hesitation—and opened them with a snap. “And when that happens, it will no doubt throw a lot of trouble and responsibility on your shoulders, the both of you. But please, brother… Won’t you work with me to fix it all?”

"…"

Jolbert met Julis's gaze in stony silence for a long moment, and then, as if no longer able to hold himself back, he burst into sudden laughter. "Ha-ha! …Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Impressive, very impressive! I never thought I'd see the day when my little sister would ask me for *my* help! You've really changed!"

"Wh-why are you laughing?! I'm being serious…!"

"I know, I know… But I can't help but wonder if this isn't due to Amagiri's—no, all of your influence," Jolbert said, dodging Julis's gaze as he looked over her companions with genuine appreciation.

"But what I was saying…!"

"All right."

"Huh?" Julis gaped, taken aback by her brother's perfectly timed nod.

"I don't really know how much I can help you…but I promise, if you really can win the Gryps, I'll bite the bullet and stop playing the fool. What do you think, Maria?"

"Hmm, I don't really understand all these complicated matters, but if that's what you've decided, Jolbert, I'll follow your lead." The queen chuckled lightly with a beaming smile.

Julis finally seemed to relax. "Brother, sister-in-law… Thank you," she said, her voice surging with resolve.

"…What wonderful siblings," Kirin said in a small voice, smiling and standing beside Ayato.

"Yep," Ayato replied, thinking about his relationship with his own sister.

Of course, Julis and Jolbert had completely different personalities, but when Ayato witnessed their shared expression of trust, he couldn't help but be reminded of Haruka.

All of a sudden, his mobile began to ring with an incoming call.

"Huh? Who would call at this time of day?" he wondered, opening an air-window, when he was confronted by an unexpected face. "Commander Lindwall?!"

The thought of Helga contacting him directly had never occurred to him, so her sudden appearance in the air-window left him more than a little flustered.

"*Sorry to bother you all of a sudden, Amagiri. I was worried that you might be asleep, but it's a good thing I got ahold of you. I wanted to let you know as soon as possible.*"

"…Let me know what?"

Given the apparent urgency of her phone call, it sounded like no trivial matter.

"*I'll try to put this as simply as I can. Ayato Amagiri, we've located your sister.*"

"—?!"

Her words ran through his body with the force of a lightning bolt.

*

"Welcome home. I must say, I expected you to stop by a little sooner," the man said, his eyes wide in bewilderment, as Claudia greeted him with a smile.

They were in the Enfield family mansion, in the suburbs of London.

The building was in the Gothic Revival style and had been relocated from the town of Tiverton. It was but one of several residences owned by the Enfield family. But Claudia knew that the man had a special attachment to this one in particular.

"There's no need to act so surprised," Claudia said with a laugh. "Ha-ha, after all, this is my home, too. Isn't it, Father?"

"…It's been a while since we've spoken face-to-face, hasn't it, Claudia?"

"That's because you won't answer my calls. You left me no choice but to come see you in person."

"…"

The man—Nicholas Enfield, Claudia's father—took off his coat in silence, his expression haggard. A middle-aged man, he had appeared in the entrance hall without a sound, accepted her words without complaint, and sat down in silence.

He had a healthy physique, and though he would be turning fifty later this year, he carried himself with a certain level of dignity, his golden hair, speckled with gray here and there, combed down neatly.

"You've obviously already heard, but Gustave Malraux has been arrested. I was going to ask you to cancel your contract with him and call him off…but it looks like my friends have already settled things."

"Yes, I know. I guess he wasn't as good as everyone made him

out to be," Nicholas said, as if it were an everyday matter.

"My! I didn't expect you to admit to it so easily. I suppose he won't reveal who his client was, then?"

"There's no point feigning ignorance. You're too smart for that. So what are you going to do? Will you press charges against me?"

"Of course not. Why on earth would I do something so wasteful?" Claudia said with an innocent laugh. "Someone from Galaxy hired a criminal to attack students from Seidoukan Academy, and the princess of a foreign country, at that. I'm not going to throw such a useful card away. I'll hold it close to my chest, until I need it."

"Galaxy had nothing to do with this. It was me—only me."

"I know that. After all, if Galaxy really wanted to stop me, they wouldn't have resorted to such a lukewarm method. But, Father, there won't be any explaining your way out of this now, given your position, will there? Mother will have probably decided as much, too, don't you think?"

"…Probably," Nicholas sighed, his face full of resignation.

Claudia's father was a chief revenue officer assistant at Galaxy. His job was to assist his wife, an executive at the integrated enterprise foundation's headquarters. It was a position that brought him as close as possible to being an executive, but he must have known that he would never reach those heights. As with Kirin's father, Kouichirou Toudou, he wasn't of that caliber.

"I'm sure Mother was aware of it from the beginning. And that she gave it her tacit consent."

"Maybe… But I can never tell what she's thinking," he muttered, slowly shaking his head. "But there's one thing I *do* understand. Now that I've failed, she won't wait long before acting herself. And when that happens, if she judges it necessary, she won't hesitate to cast me aside. Your card will be useless if that happens."

"I suppose so."

"Don't you understand, Claudia?! If that happens…!"

"I know, Father. You did it for my sake."

That was how far he was willing to go for her, out of his love.

And it was also why he would never become an executive.

"…Are you still going to take part in the Gryps?"

"Yes."

"Then please, at least change your wish. It isn't too late."

“I’ve told you before. I can’t do that,” she declared flatly.

It was the one thing she wouldn’t do.

After all, it was the reason why she had endured so much up till now.

“I…I love you, Claudia…” Nicholas’s voice was so weak that it sounded like it might fade away at any moment.

Claudia walked past him, his head hanging in resignation, and opened the door. “I love you, too, Father.”

And her mother, too. She loved all her family.

But, unfortunately, even that wasn’t enough to make her give up on her wish.

No, there wasn’t anything in this fallen world that could make her give up on it.

“Well then, good-bye, Father,” she said, closing the door.

She looked up at the cold, midwinter sky, listening to the silence of the heavy gulf that seemed to fill the space behind her.

*

Ayato, having returned to Asterisk early at the others’ suggestion, headed straight for the hospital in the central district. He was supposed to remain in Lieseltania for several days in the aftermath of the incident with Gustave in order to give evidence, but with Jolbert’s intervention, he’d managed to get himself exempted from the legal formalities, landing in Asterisk less than twelve hours after receiving Helga’s call.

Given what he had been through over the past few days, there was no denying his physical exhaustion, but he didn’t have time to worry about that right now.

“So you came.” Helga was waiting for him outside the building.

“Commander Lindwall, my sister—where is she…?!”

“Hold on a moment. Anyway, follow me. We’ll fill you in inside,” Helga said calmly, in stark contrast to his own restlessness.

She led him into the building. Ayato, barely able to contain his impatience, followed in silence as she took him deep inside, to an area that was normally off-limits, except to staff.

The building was actually just one of several facilities that belonged to the hospital. Medical treatment, examinations, and the like were generally performed in the towering complex next door.

Helga led him to a room in the basement.

“The director’s office…?” Ayato muttered suspiciously, when Helga knocked at the door.

The door slid open, and he followed her inside. There were two people waiting for them in the unexpectedly small room.

One was a short, eccentric-looking old man dressed in a white lab coat. His head was almost completely bald, but he had a huge, white beard. He seemed to be in a bad mood, and stood tapping his finger on the desk impatiently.

Ayato had met the other person before.

“Chairman…? What are you doing here?”

“It’s a rather complicated situation… Anyway, this is Director Yan Korbel. He’s in charge of the hospital here,” Madiath Mesa, the Festa Executive Committee chairman, said, introducing the old man.

But the director merely glanced at Ayato for a moment, then turned back to Madiath. “I’m sorry, but I’m very busy. Can we get this over with?”

Helga leaned down toward Ayato’s ear. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “He’s like this with everyone.”

Ayato gave her a slight nod before looking back at Madiath. “Did they really find my sister?”

“Yes. I was going to explain the situation here…but the director seems to be in a hurry, so do you mind if we talk on the way?”

“I guess not…,” he answered, not really understanding what was going on.

Madiath glanced toward Yan, his gaze seeming to suggest something. “Well then, director?”

“…Hmph.” Yan gave them all a sour look, then headed to the back wall, pressing a button to reveal a hidden corridor. Inside, there seemed to be a rather large facility.

“This is a special area. Normally, only the director and a select number of staff are allowed to enter,” Madiath said as they followed Yan through the pure-white corridor. “Now then, I suppose you’ve already heard about the former executive committee chairman, Danilo?”

“A little…”

“I see. Then this shouldn’t take long. Well, Commander Lindwall reopened the investigation into his relationship with the Eclipse, and she followed a new lead that revealed a considerable flow of money. Director Korbel here was connected to it.”

“A flow of money…?”

“Well, it sounds a little suspicious, doesn’t it, but it really isn’t that unusual. There’s quite a few cases of injury that we wouldn’t want to make public.”

“That isn’t something the police force is very happy about, though,” Helga interrupted coolly.

At this, Madiath merely flashed her a forced smile.

It was Director Yan who responded, without so much as turning around. “Even you didn’t have any problem with the independence of the hospital back then,” he grumbled.

“The situation is different now. And even then, we only gave our grudging consent. Besides, *this* is pushing the limits of your independence.”

“Now, now, you two… Anyway, Amagiri, just so long as you understand that this is a highly confidential location. Once someone has been admitted, the hospital never leaks information about them, or probes into their personal circumstances. Those are the rules. Which is why no one knew that your sister—Haruka Amagiri—had been taken here.”

“—?! So my sister’s here?!”

“Yes. It looks like Danilo arranged it.”

Ayato felt a surge of relief at his response, but at the same time, he was forced to face a level of anxiety he’d never experienced before.

“Is she… Is she all right?” he asked guardedly.

It was obvious enough that this was a special place, even within Asterisk. If she was in a place like this, her situation may have been far from normal.

“That’s…a little difficult to answer.”

“In here,” Yan said, pointing toward the wall on his right.

There was only a plate with the room number on the otherwise unremarkable wall, but when he called out a passphrase, a holographic keyboard appeared before him. He typed something into it, and the wall became transparent.

The wall seemed to turn into glass, and they could see into the entire room. It was filled with all kinds of medical devices, and on the bed in the middle of the room was—

“Haruka!”

The figure, asleep in that bed, was without a doubt Ayato’s older sister, Haruka Amagiri.

Ayato pressed against the glass as if to get closer to her. Though five years had passed since he had last seen her, she didn't seem to have changed at all from how he remembered her. Rather, she looked exactly the same.

"…Director Korbel, how long has my sister been here?"

Yan paused to think for a moment. "If memory serves me right, it must have been…oh, about five years ago. Danilo asked me to wake her."

Which meant she had been like this since shortly after arriving at Asterisk.

"I wasn't told who she was. And without any firm evidence, I'm normally not obliged to help with Stjarnagarm's investigations… But this time is different. If it's a wish from the Festa, there's no getting around it."

"Once a wish from the Festa has been accepted, carrying it out is our highest priority. And if necessary, the integrated enterprise foundations have to cooperate, too. It's an unwritten law to maintain the integrity of the Festa," Madiath said, his expression grave.

"How did… What's her condition?"

"She hasn't changed at all since we admitted her. She seems to be in a state close to suspended animation. As for the cause… We think it's due to some kind of ability."

"Is it like mine?" asked Helga, who had the ability to manipulate time around her.

But Ayato shook his head. "No… It's probably her own ability."

"What?" Yan looked at Ayato sternly. "What are you talking about? Explain yourself!"

"The power to bind all things… That's her ability. I don't know why, but she might have used it on herself."

"Hmm, I see…"

Ayato could feel it resonating from her—the same shackles that Haruka had used to bind his own power. The echo of mana was so weak that most people probably wouldn't be able to notice it, but he, who had grown up around her for most of his life, had no doubt become sensitized to it.

But why would she do that to herself…? And more importantly —

"Director, how is her treatment going?"

Yan's expression turned pale, and he looked away, stammering.

“W-well… To be honest… Nothing seems to be effective…”

“What do you mean? Isn’t ability cancellation supposed to be your specialty?” Helga asked with a frown.

“Even I’m not all-powerful.” Yan pouted. “I’ve tried everything imaginable over these past five years, but as you can see, nothing’s worked.”

It was a question he didn’t even want to consider, but Ayato had to ask. “If she doesn’t wake up…is her life in danger?”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that. If she stays like this, she’ll probably outlive you. That is, if it’s accurate to even call this being alive…”

“…I see…”

It was hardly a situation worth rejoicing over, but at least he could be reassured about that.

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but why have you still been looking after her?”

“What do you mean?” Yan responded dubiously.

“The former chairman, Danilo, has already passed away, right? So didn’t the contract end there?”

Because there had been a flow of money, the hospital had already been paid for Haruka’s treatment. But Ayato doubted it would have been enough to cover a full five years. The money had probably dried up long ago.

But—

“You dolt! Do you think I would fall so low as to abandon a patient?! Danilo might have died, but the contract is still valid!” Yan glared at him. “But now that it’s come to this, it’s up to you. If you want to transfer her to a different hospital, I won’t stop you.”

“…No. Please continue her treatment.”

He would have to contact his father, of course, but that seemed to be the best option.

“I see. In that case, we’ll keep trying. I should warn you not to get your hopes up, though.”

“Thank you,” Ayato replied, bowing his head deeply.

At that, Yan all but jumped back in surprise. “How can you thank me, in this situation?”

“…Huh?”

“Hmph! Don’t worry about it!” the director said curtly before taking off back down the corridor.

“U-um…”

“I’ll have a pass made for you later! Use the staff entrance when you come visit! All right?”

“…Yes,” Ayato murmured, dumbfounded.

Madiath gave him an amused smile. “Well, now you know what kind of person he is.”

“He hasn’t changed in fifty years,” Helga, standing behind him, muttered in her usual calm voice.

*

As he left the hospital, a raging night wind pierced his bones.

Compared to Lieseltania, where he had been until yesterday, however, it wasn’t all that cold.

“It’s gotten quite late. Do you want me to drop you off at Seidoukan?” Helga asked, her stoic face not even seeming to register the change in temperature.

“No, it’s okay,” Ayato answered politely.

He was grateful for the offer, but he wanted to be alone for a while to sort out his thoughts.

Madiath, saying he was pressed for time, had already arranged a car to pick him up.

“I see. Well then, I guess I’ll excuse myself.”

“Thank you for everything, Commander Lindwall.”

Ayato hadn’t expected anyone to find his sister so quickly. He couldn’t thank her enough for what she had done.

“There’s no need for thanks. I’m just doing my job. But you know…there is something I should tell you…,” she said, drawing close to him and lowering her voice. “Don’t put too much trust in Madiath Mesa.”

“Huh?” Ayato caught his breath.

Helga’s sharp gaze drew nearer. “We might have been allowed to investigate Danilo this time, but we weren’t given permission to follow up on every lead we had. Only a very limited number, actually. But despite that, we managed to score a bull’s-eye, which just so happened to lead us to the whereabouts of your sister.”

“…Isn’t that reading a bit too much into it?”

“Perhaps. But as Madiath said, once a wish from the Festa has been accepted, carrying it out is our highest priority. If no useful leads had popped up within the range that we were given permission to investigate, we would have tried to widen our net.

And they wouldn't have been able to refuse us… I'm sorry to have to say this, but we were a little disappointed to have found her so soon."

Of course, Ayato was ecstatic that Haruka had been found so quickly, but he could understand what Helga was saying. It had been a rare chance for her.

"It looks to me like they knew where she was to begin with, and gave us access only to what we needed to find her. And it seems it was Madiath who was responsible for that."

"What? But why would the chairman go out of his way to do something like that…?"

Madiath Mesa's job was, after all, just to manage the Festa operations.

"Well, I have a theory. Back when he was just a regular member of the Executive Committee, he was the leader of the faction opposed to Danilo. Which was why, after Danilo's death, he was also chosen to act as the representative of the Internal Investigation Committee. That was somewhat unprecedented, but not entirely unreasonable. The situation surrounding Danilo is still a taboo subject within the Administrative Committee, so they couldn't afford to put just anyone in charge."

If that was true, it certainly wasn't outlandish to suggest a connection.

"So this might just be a hunch, but unfortunately, my hunches have a habit of hitting the mark."

"That doesn't sound like a particularly nice skill to have…," Ayato said with a forced smile.

"You guessed it," Helga replied, her gaze relaxing. "Well, it's time for me to go. But please, be careful." She raised her hand lightly in farewell, before disappearing into the night.

Looks like I've got a lot to think about…

But at least he had found Haruka. Having seen her again at last, he could hardly contain his emotions.

Five years, huh…?

It was by no means a short length of time. For Ayato, it had been nearly a third of his life.

"Haruka…," he whispered, shaking his head. It was still too soon to celebrate. In her current state, he couldn't even talk to her. "But there's nothing else I can do…," he muttered again, when—

"That's not entirely true," a voice sounded from behind him.

“Huh?” He spun around to see a woman standing there.

He hadn’t been unaware of her presence, but he was nonetheless taken by surprise, as he hadn’t expected her to talk to him.

“You’re Ayato Amagiri, aren’t you?”

The woman looked slightly older than he was. She had a lean, thin physique, with long, slender arms and legs.

At first, Ayato had thought she was a doctor or nurse at the hospital, thanks to her white gown, but on closer inspection, he could see that underneath she was wearing an Allekant uniform.

She had well-proportioned features, but perhaps due to the coldness of her eyes, she gave off a somewhat suspicious aura. She had shoulder-length, messy hair, and impressively large glasses.

“I am,” Ayato replied cautiously. “Who are you?”

“Kee-hee-hee-hee. Do excuse me,” she said with a laugh as dry as the rustling of leaves. “My name is Hilda. Hilda Jane Rowlands. But you can just call me Hilda,” she purred, narrowing her eyes like a cat.

“Okay… What do you want?” Ayato said, struck by a sense of growing unease.

If he were trying to describe it, it was similar to what he’d felt when he had encountered Orphelia the other day, but he couldn’t sense any kind of threat coming from the woman standing before him. She didn’t even seem to be a Genestella, or at the very least, she didn’t seem to have kept her prana in shape. Judging from the unsteady way she held herself, she didn’t even look like she was in shape.

But for some reason he couldn’t explain, he felt overwhelmed by her presence.

“Ah, yes, that’s right. Ayato Amagiri. I thought you might be in need of my services, you see.”

“Huh…?” he replied, unable to understand what she was getting at.

Perhaps noticing his expression, she began to laugh once more in that strange voice. “Kee-hee-hee-hee. I mean, you do want to treat your sister, don’t you?”

“—?! H-how do you…?!” he stammered, reflexively crouching into a defensive posture.

Hilda merely shrugged with an amused smile. “I know. We at Tenorio have deep connections with this hospital. You might say it

was leaked to us."

Tenorio. Ayato had heard that name somewhere before…

"Oh, and I saw the news. It looks like one of our former members caused you a bit of trouble overseas. I'm terribly sorry about that."

"…A former member…?" The conversation was jumping from one topic to the next faster than he could keep pace.

"You didn't know? Gustave Malraux was a member of Tenorio —up until he dropped out of school, that is. That was several decades ago now, though."

"He was, was he?" Ayato hadn't expected to hear that name again, now that he'd returned to Asterisk.

"The data he left us is still very valuable to our younger students. Come now, Ayato. Don't you remember those pseudo-life-forms you played with a while back? We call them viscous attack phryganellinoids. It seems they were put together based on his data."

"I thought they were similar…"

If she knew that much, he doubted anything else she said could surprise him.

But it seemed he was wrong about that.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry; I seem to have gotten off topic again. I'm always doing that. Allow me to get to the point. If you let me, Ayato Amagiri, *I* can heal your sister."

"—!" Despite the ease with which she had said those words, they left him completely stunned. He braced himself, looking her in the eyes, before responding. "Is that true?"

Once more, she let out that dry, unsettling laugh. "Kee-hee-hee-hee. It is. Truly, truthfully, true." She nodded repeatedly, her narrowed eyes gleaming darkly. "Dr. Korbel won't be able to help you. He might have been great once, but I'm sorry to say he's lost his touch. He's been trying for five years, after all, and he's no closer to waking her than the day he began. But if you let me, Ayato Amagiri, *I* can do it." She smiled, the corners of her mouth puckered up eerily.

At that moment, Ayato remembered just where he had felt this kind of presence before.

It was when he had met Ernesta Kühne, the head of Pygmalion, another faction at Hilda's Allekant Académie.

But the two young women were diametric opposites. Whereas

Ernesta's spirit was like a blazing sun, Hilda emanated a drive like magma churning in some deep, dark place far beneath the earth.

"…Who are you, exactly?" Ayato asked again.

"My name is Hilda. Hilda Jane Rowlands," she repeated gleefully. "President of Allekant Académie's Research Institute, Tenorio." And with that, a dreadful flame began to burn behind her eyes. "Some people like to call me the Great Scholar, Magnum Opus."

EPILOGUE

"So…you're saying that Gustave's client was your father?"

Claudia bowed her head to her astonished friends. "Yes. I'm awfully sorry about it all. I never thought he would resort to that level of violence."

Three days had passed since Ayato had returned to Asterisk. As soon as the others had all settled back, Claudia called the four of them to the student council room to lift the curtain on the incident in Lieseltania.

"But why would your father do such a thing…?" Kirin asked.

"It's simple, I'm afraid. He would find himself in a difficult situation if I were to win the Gryps. Or rather, Galaxy would find itself in a difficult situation," Claudia answered flatly.

"…But if that's true, then they must have other ways of trying to stop you…"

"Galaxy will still be trying to work out how they want to deal with me, and measuring up the costs and benefits of doing so. My father probably wanted to put an end to it before that. He understands better than anyone what might happen to me if Galaxy decides they want to really put their minds to stopping my participation."

Julis stared at her. "Do you understand what you're saying, Claudia? If you make an enemy out of Galaxy, that's the same thing as making an enemy out of Seidoukan Academy itself! And on top of that, you can't know that you'll even win!"

"You're right to call it a bad idea. But I've no intention of giving up on my wish," Claudia said, staring back.

Julis's expression quickly softened. "I did think you were a bit smarter than that, though."

"I've only done what was necessary." Claudia, too, relaxed,

smiling in return.

"But you won't go up against them empty-handed, will you?"

"Of course not. I've been preparing for it ever since I became student council president. *Anyway, there isn't anything I can do if Galaxy gets serious about it, but I should be able to gain more time before that.* What happened in Lieseltania will certainly help in that regard." Claudia paused for a moment, frowning. "But I wouldn't be able to call you unreasonable if you all wanted to press charges against him. Especially you, Julis, considering all the damage he caused to your country."

"…"

Julis sat in silence for a while, deep in thought, before eventually shaking her head. "No. I can't say I don't want to, but you're going to need all the bargaining chips you can get, aren't you? Especially from here on out." The intensity of her gaze seemed to suggest she wasn't talking just about the Gryps.

"…I don't mind either," Saya added.

"I'm okay with it as well." Kirin nodded in agreement, but she raised her hand nervously, as if something were bothering her. "But what *is* your wish, Claudia?"

"I can't tell you that until I hear your answers to our conversation the other day," Claudia responded, glancing around at everyone. "And like I said, joining my team might mean making enemies out of Galaxy. I can't say that it's a particularly good plan from any normal point of view. So if I was in your position, I would probably turn it down right away, I suppose."

"…But you're still inviting us?" Julis flashed her an astonished, yet at the same time amused, smile. "Oh well. Putting the circumstances aside, and looking just at our overall fighting strength, I think there's definitely an appeal to it. I'm in," she declared flatly.

"M-me too! I'll join, too!" Kirin nodded with excitement. "I've wanted to fight alongside you ever since I saw you in the last Gryps…!"

"Thank you, you two. Thank you so much," Claudia said, before turning her gaze toward Saya. "Miss Sasamiya, what will you do?"

"Hmm… To be honest, I'm not very interested in the Gryps… I've already helped my father out, and it looks like those puppets from Allekant won't be able to participate either…"

The use of sentient machines as proxy fighters had been a

special provision only for the Phoenix, and the majority of commentators seemed to be of the opinion that they wouldn't be permitted again this time.

"…So my decision depends on Ayato," she finished.

All gazes swung to him, who had been sitting in silence and not uttered so much as a word.

"Ayato… You've been acting a little strange recently. Is something wrong?" Julis asked uncertainly. "Your sister was okay, wasn't she?"

They all knew why he had returned to Asterisk early, and he had told them almost everything that had happened at the hospital.

What he hadn't told them was what had come after.

"…Julis, can we talk, later?"

"U-uh… Okay…," she said, looking at him warily.

With that, Ayato once again strengthened his resolve, and turned to Claudia. "Okay. I'll join your team. But on one condition —let's make sure we win."

AFTERWORD

Hello, Yuu Miyazaki here.

Here you have it, Volume 6 of *The Asterisk War*. There was a bit of a wait for Volume 5, so I wanted to bring this one to you as quickly as possible.

This volume takes place outside of the city of Asterisk. The story is supposed to mainly take place in Asterisk, as per the title, but I thought it would be a good idea to illustrate Julis's background a little more (Julis is one of the story's heroines, but at the same time, she's also one of the protagonists).

I was originally going to have everyone stop at Kirin's house, too, but due to the overall plot development and page count, I'll have to leave that for another episode. As such, we plan to increase the overall number of volumes, so I'd like to ask Kirin's fans to hold out just a little longer.

The Gryps arc will finally get under way in the next volume. It will start with the school fair, where our friends' rivals from the various schools will make an appearance. Sylvia didn't feature very much in this volume, so she'll be entering the stage in full swing, too. I hope that you're all looking forward to it as much as I am.

And okiura has given us some wonderful illustrations yet again. The cover art of Orphelia is so beautiful, it really sends a shiver down my spine! I'm incredibly obliged to him for continuing to produce such terrific illustrations for new characters with each and every volume.

On top of that, it was recently announced that a manga adaptation of a side story to *The Asterisk War* will be serialized in *Bessatsu Shōnen* magazine! I've been involved in producing the original story for it. Keep your eyes open for more information!

And of course, Ningen's manga adaptation of *The Asterisk War* in *Monthly Comic Alive* is still running strong. It's about to reach the climax from Volume 1, so let's all keep supporting it!

Last but not least, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me out so much with finishing this volume.

To my editor, Mr. Ikemoto, thank you so much for all your help despite the many difficulties. And I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to Ohrui and everyone else in the editorial department, and most of all, to all of you, my readers, for your continued support.

I'm looking forward to seeing you all again in the next volume.

Yuu Miyazaki
May 2014

characters

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

ERNESTA KÜHNE
A genius meteoric engineer, the pride of Allekant. Head of the Pygmalion faction.

CAMILLA PARETO
Specializes in Lux development, and inseparable from Ernesta. Head of the Ferrovius faction.

ARDY (AR-D)—"ABSOLUTE REFUSAL" DEFENDED MODEL
Autonomous Puppet created by Ernesta.

RIMCY (RM-C)—"RUINOUS MIGHT" CANNON MODEL
Autonomous Puppet created by Ernesta.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

DIRK EBERWEIN
A devilishly clever young man known as the Devious King, Tyrant. The first non-Genestella student council president of Le Wolfe.

KORONA KASHIMARU
The student council president's secretary. Unranked, with no powers useful in battle despite being a Genestella.

IRENE URZAIZ
Ranked third at Le Wolfe. Alias the Vampire Princess, Lemilesis.

PRISCILLA URZAIZ
Unranked. Irene's younger sister, and a regenerative (a Genestella with healing powers).

ORPHELIA LANDLUFEN
The number one ranked student at Le Wolfe, two-time champion of the Lindvolus, and said to be the strongest Strega in Asterisk's history. Also known as the Witch of Solitary Venom.

ST. GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

ERNEST FAIRCLOUGH
Student council president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked first, alias the Paladin, Pendragon.

LAETITIA BLANCHARD
Student council vice president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked second, alias the Witch of Shining Wings, Gloriana.

ELLIOT FORSTER & DOROTEO LEMUS
Gallardworth students who faced Julis and Ayato in the Phoenix semifinal match. Ranked twelfth and eleventh, respectively.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

XINGLOU FAN
Student council president of Jie Long Seventh Institute. Successor to the alias Immanent Heaven, Banyuu Tenra and one of the strongest fighters in all Asterisk.

ZHAO HUFENG
Ranked fifth. An exceptional martial artist and Xinglou's star pupil. Alias the Peerless Thorn, Tenka Muscu.

SHENYUN LI AND SHENHUA LI
Twin brother and sister, ranked ninth and tenth. Alias the Phantom Builder, Genrei Souki, and the Phantom Vanisher, Genrei Musan, respectively.

SONG AND LUO
Pupils of Xinglou who faced Ayato and Julis in the fifth round of the Phoenix. Ranked twentieth and twenty-third at Jie Long.

QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

SYLVIA LYYNEHEYM
Student council president and first-ranked fighter at Queenvale, she placed second in the previous Lindvolus. Alias the Witch of Fearsome Melody, Sigrdrifa.

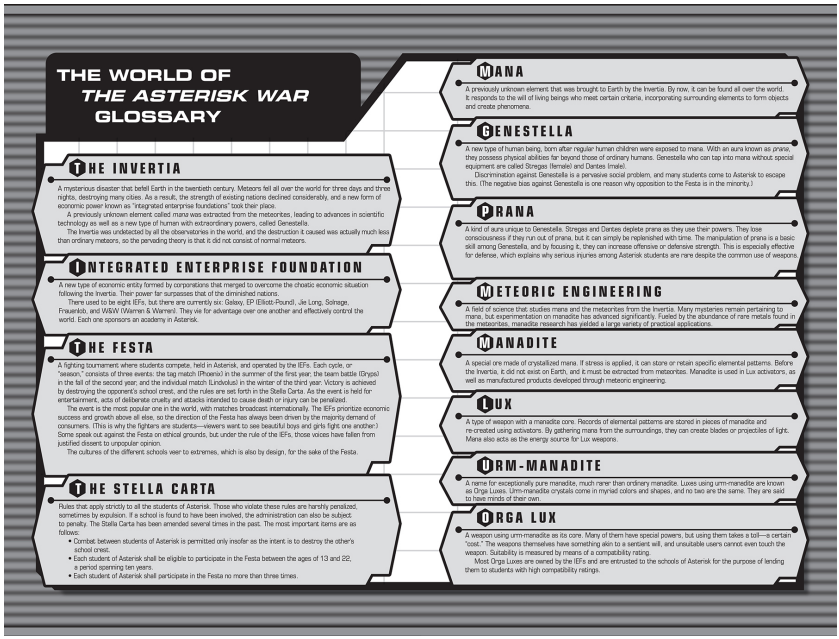
OTHERS

MADIATH MESA
Chairman of the Executive Committee for the Festa, granted full authority over the events by the six integrated enterprise foundations.

FLORA KLEMM
A ten-year-old girl from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

HARUKA AMAGIRI
Ayato's older sister, missing for five years.

JOLBERT
Julis's older brother and the king of Lieseltania.


THE WORLD OF
THE ASTERISK WAR
GLOSSARY
THE INVERTIA
A mysterious disaster that befell Earth in the twentieth century. Meteors fell all over the world for three days and three nights, destroying many cities. As a result, the strength of existing nations declined considerably, and a new form of economic power known as "integrated enterprise foundations" took their place.
A previously unknown element called mana was extracted from the meteorites, leading to advances in scientific technology as well as a new type of human with extraordinary powers, called Genestella.
The Invertia was undetected by all the observatories in the world, and the destruction it caused was actually much less than ordinary meteors, so the pervading theory is that it did not consist of normal meteors.
INTEGRATED ENTERPRISE FOUNDATION
A new type of economic entity formed by corporations that merged to overcome the chaotic economic situation following the Invertia. Their power far surpasses that of the diminished nations.
There used to be eight IEFs, but there are currently six: Galaxy, EP (Elliott-Pound), Jie Long, Solnage, Frauenlob, and W&W (Warren & Warren). They vie for advantage over one another and effectively control the world. Each one sponsors an academy in Asterisk.
THE FESTA
A fighting tournament where students compete, held in Asterisk, and operated by the IEFs. Each cycle, or "season," consists of three events: the tag match (Phoenix) in the summer of the first year; the team battle (Dryos) in the fall of the second year; and the individual match (Lindelux) in the winter of the third year. Victory is achieved by destroying the opponent's school crest, and the rules are set forth in the Stella Carta. As the event is held for entertainment, acts of deliberate cruelty and attacks intended to cause death or injury can be penalized.
The event is the most popular one in the world, with matches broadcast internationally. The IEFs prioritize economic success and growth above all else, so the direction of the Festa has always been driven by the majority demand of consumers. (This is why the fighters are students—viewers want to see beautiful boys and girls fight one another.) Some speak out against the Festa on ethical grounds, but under the rule of the IEFs, those voices have fallen from justified dissent to unpopular opinion.
The cultures of the different schools veer to extremes, which is also by design, for the sake of the Festa.
THE STELLA CARTA
Rules that apply strictly to all the students of Asterisk. Those who violate these rules are harshly penalized, sometimes by expulsion. If a school is found to have been involved, the administration can also be subject to penalty. The Stella Carta has been amended several times in the past. The most important items are as follows:
• Combat between students of Asterisk is permitted only insofar as the intent is to destroy the other's school crest.
• Each student of Asterisk shall be eligible to participate in the Festa between the ages of 13 and 22, a period spanning ten years.
• Each student of Asterisk shall participate in the Festa no more than three times.
MANA
A previously unknown element that was brought to Earth by the Invertia. By now, it can be found all over the world. It responds to the will of living beings who meet certain criteria, incorporating surrounding elements to form objects and create phenomena.
GENESTELLA
A new type of human being, born after regular human children were exposed to mana. With an aura known as prana, they possess physical abilities far beyond those of ordinary humans. Genestella who can tap into mana without special equipment are called Streges (female) and Dantes (male).
Discrimination against Genestella is a pervasive social problem, and many students come to Asterisk to escape this. (The negative bias against Genestella is one reason why opposition to the Festa is in the minority.)
PRANA
A kind of aura unique to Genestella. Streges and Dantes deplete prana as they use their powers. They lose consciousness if they run out of prana, but it can simply be replenished with time. The manipulation of prana is a basic skill among Genestella, and by focusing it, they can increase offensive or defensive strength. This is especially effective for defense, which explains why serious injuries among Asterisk students are rare despite the common use of weapons.
METEORIC ENGINEERING
A field of science that studies mana and the meteorites from the Invertia. Many mysteries remain pertaining to mana, but experimentation on manadite has advanced significantly. Fueled by the abundance of rare metals found in the meteorites, manadite research has yielded a large variety of practical applications.
MANADITE
A special ore made of crystallized mana. If stress is applied, it can store or retain specific elemental patterns. Before the Invertia, it did not exist on Earth, and it must be extracted from meteorites. Manadite is used in Lux activators, as well as manufactured products developed through meteoric engineering.
LUX
A type of weapon with a manadite core. Records of elemental patterns are stored in pieces of manadite and re-created using activators. By gathering mana from the surroundings, they can create blades or projectiles of light. Mana also acts as the energy source for Lux weapons.
URM-MANADITE
A name for exceptionally pure manadite, much rarer than ordinary manadite. Luxes using urm-manadite are known as Orga Luxes. Urm-manadite crystals come in myriad colors and shapes, and no two are the same. They are said to have minds of their own.
ORGA LUX
A weapon using urm-manadite as its core. Many of them have special powers, but using them takes a toll—a certain "cost." The weapons themselves have something akin to a sentient will, and unsuitable users cannot even touch the weapon. Suitability is measured by means of a compatibility rating.
Most Orga Luxes are owned by the IEFs and are entrusted to the schools of Asterisk for the purpose of lending them to students with high compatibility ratings.

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